

3x3

Three Short Novels

Stairway to the Sea

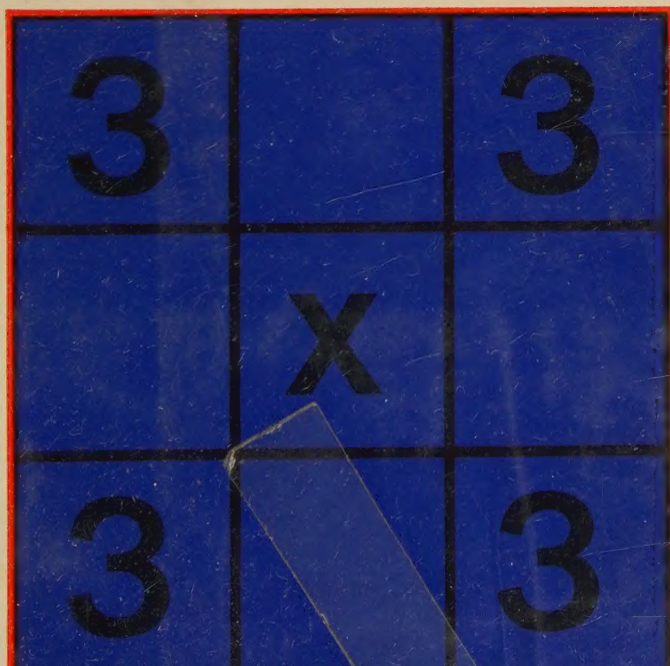
by Thomas Firth Jones

This Night in Sodom

by Charles Jules Reiter

Custom

by John Schultz



3x3

15
345
T4

Stairway to the Sea
by Thomas Firth Jones

This Night in Sodom
by Charles Jules Reiter

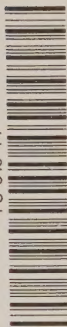
Custom
by John Schultz

This volume introduces the first novels of three young American writers. They have been chosen for originality of conception and excellence of execution. Varying widely in style and content, they are representative of the best in new American writing.

In Thomas Firth Jones' *Stairway to the Sea*, three young art students create an adolescent *ménage à trois* in a dilapidated house near Philadelphia. Their half-serious, half-playful games with art, motorcycles, and sex carry them out of their depth, into a situation they cannot handle. With an exceptional talent for descriptive and narrative writing, the author brings his story to its shocking conclusion against a background of college students affecting sophistication in local night spots, the noises, smells, and activities of painting and sculpting studios, zany home dinners, experiments of love, and wild motorcycle escapades.

(continued on back flap)

PS 345 T4



3 0600 01318 9486

SACRAMENTO STATE COLLEGE LIBRARY

This book is due on the last date stamped below.

Failure to return books on the date due will result in assessment of prescribed fines.

NEW BOOK -- CAN BE
CIRCULATED BEGINNING

JAN 25 1963

DEC 16 1964
DEC 16 1964

JAN 30 1963

JAN 4 1965

MAR 12 1963

MAR 13 1963

MAR 29 1963

DEC 17 1964

MAR 29 1963

MAR 17 1965

APR 8 1963

MAR 10 1965

APR 29 1963

APR 30 1963

MAR 9 1966

MAY 17 1963

JUN 4 1963

JUN 19 1963


MAR 9 1966

MAY 6 1966

JUN 3 1964

MAY 5 1966

JUN 3 1964



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

3x3

3x3

11
Stairway to the Sea

by Thomas Firth Jones

This Night in Sodom

by Charles Jules Reiter

Custom

by John Schultz

Grove Press, Inc.
New York

Evergreen Books Ltd.
London

Stairway to the Sea copyright © 1962 by Thomas Firth Jones
All Rights Reserved

This Night in Sodom copyright © 1962 by Charles Jules Reiter
All Rights Reserved

Custom copyright © 1962 by John Schultz
All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 61-11771
First Printing

Manufactured in the United States of America

~~813.08~~

~~7531~~

Stairway to the Sea

by Thomas Firth Jones

**SACRAMENTO STATE
COLLEGE LIBRARY**

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
That with a god have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given;
Though like waves breaking it may be,
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.

—Edwin Arlington Robinson, “Eros Turannos”

*for Gerda Blumenthal,
teacher at Washington College,
who is not accountable for the substance of this story.*

SUNDAY

Linda is asleep now. The light beside her bed is turned out, which means that she has finished the half-hour which she punctually spends every night in reading an improving book; at the end of half an hour, she indulges herself only in finishing the page before putting the book aside. You would be amused at the titles which she finds rewarding: *My Forty Years as a Marriage Counselor*; *Spreading Brotherhood through Education*; *The Triumph of My Religious Adventure*. I sometimes wonder that she can finish that final page when her half-hour is up; but I can assure you that whatever she may lack, she does not lack discipline.

Life without discipline is inconceivable to her, and her reading is only the last of many rituals which prepare her for sleep. At nine-thirty she kisses me; she tells me she is going to take a bath; she takes the bath. She uses yellow soap because it is more efficient than those soaps that have a silly smell to them, and she uses a towel rough as garnet paper because it promotes the circulation. Her flesh is firm under her smooth skin, so that she looks like a red rubber ball when she sits down, after bathing, on the toilet to urinate. She does not close the bathroom door, of course,

because we are sleeping together now, and such pretensions would be out of place in an ordered life.

Clean and empty, she brushes her teeth with that ammoniated powder that you do not rinse out: it prevents cavities. She dresses in pajamas, flannel ones at this time of year; for no matter how cold it may be outside, it wouldn't be healthy to sleep with the window closed. There would be something almost sinful about it. She comes into the living room before going to bed, to turn the thermostat down in case I should forget it. She turns it down from sixty-nine to sixty-two, and it makes no difference to her that, due to the decrepitude of the building, the temperature may vary fifteen degrees from one side of a room to another. The thermostat still must read correctly.

She kisses me again, tells me not to be too late, and goes to her reading, so that her light may be out by ten-thirty promptly. And as a way of assuring you that there is no retribution for the wicked, let me say that she is at once asleep. However, I think the time for her retribution is coming soon. And when it does come, I know that she will accede to it with dignity. So much the worse for her.

But I have yet to tell you of the last ritual, the one which is not performed every night, because the books say it is too sapping of your energies, but which she insists be done at regular intervals: I mean our love-making. Yet love-making is not the right term for it, because there is no love there, not the kind of love that makes two people copulate. There is rather the beginning of what she sees as a more mature love, an esteem built on mutual respect and confidence and some funny stuff called "spiritual bond." As she describes it, I think it must come in a tube like Duco cement, and each year God makes you an anniversary present of a little more. However, it doesn't do much for a dry vagina: God would be more thoughtful if he gave us a jar of vaseline instead.

Tonight we are due. Actually, by the every-other-night schedule, last night was supposed to be it: but I was too drunk to be

good for anything; so tonight I know what is expected of me. But I feel strangely restless, as if for once the flesh would not suffice, and I'll stay up a while. I know that, however late I come to bed, Linda will wake up, and our dumb show will begin.

The room where I sit now, working indifferently on a poster for the commercial course, is called *the living room* by the landlady who rents this apartment to us, but we have made it into what we call, with equal extravagance, *the studio*. To that end everything has been whitewashed: walls, floor, ceiling, furniture, books; and our *oeuvres* are spread out in all states of completion and decay. We are art school students, and when you add to the projects we do at school the ones we play with at home, you can perhaps imagine the mess it makes. It is surprising that a girl so precise in her personal habits as Linda should be content to live in such a rookery, but I think the answer may be found in Jennie.

Jennie is Linda's roommate: that is to say, they began the year sharing the apartment together. It was not until November that I started screwing around with Linda, and it was decided that I should move in to help with the expenses. However, as Jennie has a bedroom all to herself, except for a one-night stand every week or two, and as Linda and I share a room together, there is contention over who should pay what share. Jennie insists on even thirds, and so far that method has prevailed; but Linda keeps a careful record, noting each month what she calculates Jennie to owe by the fifty-fifty split method. I think she has a notion of confronting Jennie's parents at the end of the year, and making them pay up.

Jennie is quite different from Linda: she is loud and demanding where Linda is quiet and self-assured. She keeps the apartment in turmoil by the rasp of her voice and the violence of her gestures. Only a week ago I had just finished an oil sketch which I thought showed considerable skill. It was a still life copied from Cézanne, but painted on a numbers painting panel titled "The Red Barn." I had laid the paint on in thin glazes so that, al-

though Cézanne's composition was sharp and clear, the blue lines and numbers were plainly visible beneath it. I had titled the picture "Do It Yourself #1" and was gazing at it fondly when Jennie burst in. Without even looking at it she said, "That picture is for shit," and snatched it from my hands. She whirled to the standing lamp and impaled the panel on its sharp, wrought-iron standard.

Then I had to hit her, if my possessions were ever to be safe from her in the future; and when her nose bled I threw her in her room and locked the door. She yowled as if she were the injured party, such a yowl that our landlady came doddering up the stairs. I waited until the landlady had knocked quite a while, then opened the door and bellowed so loud that she went scuttling back down. I shouted to Jennie that I was preparing to destroy everything of hers that I could find in the apartment: pictures, statues, douche bag, everything; and she became quiet so that all I could hear was a soft whimpering from the other side of the door. Of course she was just putting on an act; but I am such a gentle person, so calm, so reasonable, that I knew before I said it that I couldn't do it. I settled for cutting the bristles off her toothbrush. And I found that the hole Jennie had made in my panel was just large enough to insert a small light bulb, which made a big improvement in the painting.

Jennie is a big girl. She is bony in the wrong places, and her posture does not emphasize her charms. She has a skin condition which she claims is venereal disease, but anyone can see it's only pimples from eating too many candy bars. She likes to wear sleek, tight-fitting dresses, like a Vogue model; and in them she presents a formidable appearance. Her feet are always bare when she is in the house, and she wears nail polish of many different colors, although she will tolerate no other cosmetic. Her hair, which she combs carefully and often, has the quality of a horse's mane, and she cuts it according to her fancy, never managing to get one side even with the other. In all of this she is the opposite of Linda.

Linda is shorter and tighter knit. She has dark, soft hair, functionally cut to be easily combed and to stay out of her eyes: it forms itself artlessly about her skull, making her look like a gymnast. Her features are regular and undistinguished: the nose blunt, the chin round, the cheekbones little evident. As for her eyes, I have never seen them, for they never look at you directly, and you never look at them. Even today I could not tell you what color they are, although I have a precise knowledge of the other parts of her body.

It is in her flesh that I rejoice chiefly, her fantastic flesh. It isn't the color, for that I seldom notice. I suppose it is white now and will be brown in summer, and it must be pinkish here and there; I know that it is rubber-ball red after a bath. But the thing that really fascinates me is the texture of the stuff: it is hard as rubber, as a rubber ball. There is no fat on Linda anywhere, no place where you can stick your finger in and find it soft and spongy; and yet no bones show either, for all is covered with a layer of that wonderful flesh. Her skin trusses her in, so that even shaking hands with her is a sensual experience unique in its intensity. To what shall I compare her? She is like a fruit, like a green peach on a tree that feels so good when you touch it that you want to squeeze and squeeze until it is all pulp and stone in your hand. And when I first knew her I was just far enough from childhood to have forgotten that lesson children learn: green fruit makes you sick.

I had sickness of another kind: I wanted her. I was sick with wanting her: wanting her breasts, small and smooth, as if rubber had been poured in a teacup and allowed to harden. I wanted her belly, tight like a trampoline, and her intricate ears, like children's plastic toys. But now I have all that, with tedious regularity.

That is really why I am staying up this Sunday night. I don't give a damn about this poster, and it isn't due for a week anyway. Sleeping Linda awaits me confidently in the bedroom;

but outside our gothic windows there are stars, and the bare branches of trees screech slate from the mansard roof. In the walls mice play their curious, deadly games, scratching and chewing at lath and stud. A house like this is more alive at night than in the day, for in the light it appears immobile, as if all our banging and halooing could not rattle a joist or cut a smile on the degenerate plaster. The house sits solidly on its corner lot, surrounded by an iron fence, a tall building to whom dilapidation is a threat but not an imposition. Fashion has deserted it, but a few similar houses on the street assure its identity. When it was built, in the eighteen-sixties, it was part of a burgeoning residential neighborhood in Crefeld; and now Crefeld itself is only a section of "Greater Philadelphia." But by daylight the house sits on its corner with such dignity as assures you of its eminence.

At night, as if afraid of the dark, the house cowers and becomes insubstantial. Its wood complains and its stone sweats; and to our apartment (we hold the entire top floor, from which we clearly command the house's destiny) it brings its distress, its constipation. The flooring takes on a springy pleading, the wind declaims among the shutters, and mice scratch the many sores. At last the whole house seems to move in a swaying plaint, rocking us into uneasy sleep.

But tonight I will hear it out and wait for Jennie to come back. She went home this weekend, and she will be back in an hour or two, bringing what she considers her best paintings with her. There is to be a show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art of the best student paintings from the art schools in the city, and the preliminary contest to decide which pictures will be hung takes place next Thursday. The teacher at school who is Jennie's adviser and sometime lover insists that for every painting she submits from her present Rouault phase, she submit at least one from the previous phase. Of course we all know that Jennie will find black paint and brush somewhere and make all her old paintings into Rouaults before she gets them to the show. Soon

she will come bursting into the apartment, banging the door and making the mice scuttle, and she will shout to me across the living room, "Lookit what I did, Lochinvar!"

She will range the pictures in a row along the wall, and I will pretend that I am the judge at a show, pulling sagely on my goatee and striking mannered poses as I walk up and down before them. Jennie will frisk around, trying to goose or kiss me according to her mood. And if I feel like a real bastard, I will give her a long, lover's kiss, until her mouth is a frenzy and her body is plastered against me. Then I will go to the bedroom and lay Linda.

MONDAY

“Why the hell can’t you learn to cook scrambled eggs, Lochinvar?” asked Jennie. The three of us were sitting at the kitchen table on Monday morning, and the question was directed to me, whom she always called either Lochinvar or Shithead, though my real name is neither of these. It is easy to see how she arrived at the latter name, but the former is more of a puzzle. However, she hung it on me almost before I knew her, and if asked about it she said that I had come out of the West to save Linda from the corruption and sinfulness of herself, Jennie. She clung to the idea, though I often told her that none of it was true, and that it was patently not my good broadsword that had won me Linda.

“I said, Lochinvar, ‘Why can’t you learn how to cook scrambled eggs?’ ”

I, who had just presented her with the same fried egg that she got every morning when I did the cooking, leaned back in my chair. “Did you? I must have misunderstood you. I thought you said, ‘Why *the hell* can’t you learn how to cook scrambled eggs?’ ”

She leaned back in her chair in perfect imitation and, loading her knife with a strawberry from the jam jar, she let fly. I tried

to duck but fell over backward, raking my head against the stove's many knobs and handles. As for the strawberry, it hit Linda and fell into the pocket of her clean white blouse, so that when my head was again above the table, I saw what appeared to be Linda's nipple popping through a hole in her clothes. I would have laughed, but my head hurt too much; and I would have cursed Jennie and belted her, but Linda was there. I never swore in Linda's presence, though Jennie gave me plenty of provocation.

"Dig the girl with the strawberry mark!" she hooted now, brandishing the knife in triumph. "I'm a deadeye with the table knife!" But even Jennie soon realized that she could not bluff it through; and pushing past me she stumbled over to Linda and fell on her knees beside her. "I didn't mean to hit you, Linda: I was aiming at Lochinvar. I didn't mean to ruin your fresh blouse. Christ, I'm sorry. If you take it off right away, I'll wash it and iron it dry. I can have it done before we go to school." She began undoing the buttons of the blouse.

Linda rose from her chair, putting down her half-finished cup of coffee. She seemed perfectly calm and reserved, but I had lived with her long enough to know what was going on inside, and so did Jennie. "It's all right," she said. "It's perfectly all right. Don't make such a big fuss about it. Things like this happen all the time. I'll just go to the bathroom and wipe the spot off it, and it will be perfectly all right. There's no need to make such a fuss." Ashen-faced, she left us for the bathroom.

"See what you've done, you dumb shit," I said as soon as she was gone. "You've got her all pissed off, and she won't get over it the rest of the day."

"Who's got her pissed off?" asked Jennie, back to her old self again. "You ducked when you saw the jam coming. It wouldn't have been anywhere near her if you hadn't ducked, so it's all your fault. And as for being in a fit the rest of the day, if I had a

lover who couldn't get me out of a funk, I'd kick his ass right out of the house."

"You'd kick him out if he didn't walk out first. Who'd want a woman with three tits anyway?" Jennie had once confided to me the secret of her charms.

"Lots of men would. Lots of them."

"Like who? Three-headed men?"

"There's something in that," she said. "I guess your two heads make you just about right for Linda, don't they?"

"Will you two quit fighting and get ready?" said Linda, coming to the doorway. "We'll be late for school."

In the car Linda and I invariably behaved as any bourgeois couple would do: we held hands. It did not matter what had gone before or what each of us might be thinking: we held hands. I remember one morning when we woke up to find that I had put a toenail through the upper sheet during the night, and now the sheet was ripped from top to bottom, save for the edges. It was a fancy sheet, one which had belonged to her father and mother, and she set great store by it, often telling me that for all she knew she had been conceived under that sheet. When I saw it torn, I knew the situation was grim, and I saw bluffing as the only way of getting through it. Jumping from the bed with a laugh, I tore the scalloped edge completely free, wound it around my nude body like a mummy, and essayed the parody of a dance, while I croaked a tune through the morning mucus in my throat. The performance was not a success.

Linda rose with perfect naked stateliness and stalked to the bathroom. By the time she returned I had found my clothes and what dignity I could; and with careful silence I folded up the sheet. There was no mention of the incident from her, then or later. There was no talk from her at all until evening that day. But on the way to school that morning we held hands.

On the morning of the Monday when I ducked and Jennie

used her knife to catapult the jam, I rode all the way to school holding hands with the girl with the strawberry mark; and we rode in silence, while Jennie chewed her cuticles in the back. As I have said, even touching Linda's hand was a lively experience, and usually by the time we got to school I felt ready to turn around and come home again. But on that morning I had no such inclination, though the hand was there, firm and sensuous as ever. We went sedately to our first class, Jennie to painting and the two of us, who were a year behind her, to pottery.

Classes at art school ran for two hours, because it took time to get the material set up, and because a longer time should always be allowed for play than for work. At our school the pottery studio was a former greenhouse, and potter's wheels lined the walls, with a furnace room converted to a huge kiln. Linda put her smock on smartly and took a position between two already busy wheels, because it was her practice at school to pretend that she barely knew me. Of course, the rumor of our arrangement had been around so long that it wasn't even interesting anymore: Jennie had seen to that. But the more general the knowledge became, the more determinedly did Linda's demeanor deny it.

In whatever studio she happened to be, she allowed herself a minute or two of conversation with the other students and then went busily to work. Working ceaselessly as long as a model would pose or a wheel spin, she turned out some of the best work in school. It showed, beyond technical skill and understanding of the problems, the absoluteness of her concentration. But this morning when she had just begun to work, one of the students next to her moved away, and I jumped in with my lump of clay in hand. Jennie had said that a lover should be able to bring his mistress out of her funk, and I knew she was right. I was determined to demonstrate.

"What do you think of the way Jennie got so upset this morn-

ing? I think those sudden ups and downs of hers are rather childish, don't you?"

"That's just the way she is. It's not worth discussing." She paused in her talk while she made doubly sure that her clay was centered and began to bore the initial hole in it with her thumb. Then she said, "If you don't like it, you can move out." She smiled at me affably.

I got down on the floor, in the pleading posture which is assumed by knights in Victorian prints. "But Madam," I said, "how could I bear to be parted from you? Do you want me to move out?"

"I don't care. You can do whatever you like." There were few things which pleased Linda as much as to tell me that she didn't give a damn about me and still have me stick around.

"Madam, the intimacies which we have shared would make life without you unthinkable. In my breast burns a passion . . ." but my concentration snapped, and I could not think of a way to finish it. Linda cut her work free and took it to a wheel at the other end of the studio.

From the leather-hard closet I took a piece that wanted cutting down, and with it I followed her; I was determined that Jennie was right: I should be able to turn the mood. I leaned on the tray surrounding her wheel and said with as much ease as I could, "What are you making, Linda?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"But I'm interested in what you're doing. I'd like to know. Won't you tell me what you're doing?"

Inside her I could feel the struggle: on one side the desire to pass it all off with an easy remark, and on the other the demon that would not let her go.

"Go away," she said in a whisper and between clenched teeth "For God's sake, please go away now."

I went away. Linda had been like that ever since I had first

known her, and the more intimately I knew her the more it was so. There had been a time, perhaps a month of it early in the winter, when she had tried to be otherwise: her reactions then had been almost normal: she had even been affectionate. But there was a crisis, a turning point, after which she was always clenched-teeth Linda to me.

I met her, of course, in my freshman year, for the school was small enough so that we all knew each other. But I was not really aware of her until this year, when we were thrown together in several courses, particularly in the English literature course which we were required to take. The poor teacher who came in two days a week to guide the artists to culture didn't have a chance. He was universally disliked because his subject was dull, his audience captive, and his manner platitudinous and boorish. As one who knew more than most of the students about literature, I undertook to contest each point with him, wrecking his course plan to the point where he had to postpone and cancel most of the assignments. In this way I made a great hit with my classmates, and Linda among them.

It is fair to say that I could have had at least a date with any of the girls, but the reason that I picked Linda as the object of my autumn irruption was that one day, as a group of us were joking in the snack bar, I happened to grab her bare arm. That did it: the investment began.

In spite of the favors which I knew Linda had given to others the year before, it took me a month to seduce her, and it was damned hard work. I took her to museums and coffee shops; I bought her hi-fi records and cooked her spaghetti with real mozzarella in it. I talked with her about the most extraordinary subjects: classical music, house plants, women's shoes. It was remarkable that whatever she liked I liked, and whatever interested her interested me. But just when I seemed to be going on forever making no progress, we went down to Philadelphia, to a coffee shop called the Gelded Cage.

"It's the *Gilded Cage*," said Linda with blind conviction. "You know it is."

I, who could look around me and easily see how gelded it was, was not so sure. But I was still courting her, in a despairing kind of way, and so I held my peace. "You're right, so it is. But let's have something. You want *espresso*?"

"I'll have a Missionary's Downfall," she said.

I had half a hunch I was made right then, but I kept my mouth shut and waited till the drink came. It was a weird, non-alcoholic conglomeration of fruit juice and ices, just the kind of thing that the usual Linda would have disclaimed as disgusting and bad for the digestion. She bolted it in what seemed a single swallow and said, "I want to go to bed. Take me home."

Up the East River Drive I drove at twenty miles an hour, to prolong the savor of my victory. The hand so long withheld was in my lap now, and the head on my shoulder; but I felt curiously detached, as if the physical thing did not matter anymore, as if it had taken place already. This girl beside me: what was she, compared to all the experience I was to have? What was she, compared to the black night, or to the trees, now shedding their last leaves in the lamplight? Nature would have only one night like this to offer me: never would time, objects, and weather come together in this combination again; and surely never again would trees drop their leaves with such poignant regret. I knew there would be no other night; but as we purred along the river drive, my body close to Linda now but my spirit farther from hers than ever, I knew that there would be other girls.

When we had climbed the winding stairs and let ourselves in, we were greeted by someone whom I had altogether forgotten: Jennie. I didn't know her very well at that time, and I stood somewhat in awe of the great, gangling thing who threw herself around the apartment like a medicine ball, breaking whatever was in her way and swearing as well as I could myself. She was in the kitchen making a sculpture armature out of coat

hangers; and at the sight of her my palms began to sweat, and I was filled with more desire and passion for Linda than I had felt in all the long month before. "Jesus!" I thought, "I'm going to miss my goddam chance!"

But Linda led me to the table where Jennie was working. "I'm going to bed," she said, "and I'm taking him with me."

"O. K.," said Jennie, "I won't listen."

*

*

*

If Jennie had been listening to us through the bedroom door, she would not have found it stimulating. Linda took off most of her clothes and lay down on the bed wearily, much like the typist in "The Waste Land." She lay slightly on one side for modesty's sake, and she gazed at the wall without having any idea of seeing it. I could be sure that there was only one thought in her mind: "This is going to throw my evening schedule off."

I, the young man carbuncular, undressed and slipped into the bed beside her; and seeing no other vantage point, her back being toward me, I inserted my tongue in her armpit and waited for her to do something. But as she did not move, I began to foresee a long evening; and withdrawing my tongue I said brightly, "Hi! It's me."

With that she rolled over, stared me full in the face for some time, and replied, "Yes, so I see."

I fell to kissing her vehemently, making what protestations occurred to me, while she patted my head abstractedly and muttered, "Yes, well; yes, well." In this manner I worked my way downward, removing garments as I went. But as soon as she felt the last elastic snap, Linda ceased even such small encouragements as she had been giving me: now she lay altogether still, as if the rubber of her flesh were turned to jelly for the time. Not a toe moved, not an eyelash twitched; only the irregular rise and fall of her belly indicated that she was still alive. Lovingly, I

tried to induce any response from her, vocal or physical, but she would do no more than move her legs a little farther apart.

By the time I realized this was all she meant to do, it was too late for me and I lay back beside her on the pillows, no part of my body touching hers. Thus we lay, like two cadavers, until she realized that something hadn't happened. She raised herself on an elbow, as if waking from a drugged sleep, and said, "What's the matter?"

"I'm limp," I said.

"Limp?"

"Yes, limp. Prostrate. Paralyzed. Washed out. *Impotent*."

She did not speak again, but squirmed over to where I lay; and throwing her arm and leg across my flaccid body, she kissed me tenderly on the cheek. She was instantly asleep, content as a small animal given the breast, her little paws crooked as in prayer. But I did not sleep for a long time, and then fitfully; and when morning came through the arched window, I slipped out of bed with relief and got dressed.

So began the weeks of which I can say that Linda truly loved me as she never loved another man. When we went to school, she rode with her head on my shoulder or in my lap; and when we parked the car and walked to classes, nothing would do but that she take my arm. In school she showed her affection with a kiss whenever there was a semblance of privacy, and with so much holding hands that I was damned sick of it. The minute I got a paint brush in one hand she must hold the other. She asked my advice on her own work, and she not only listened as if I were doing her a favor, but she instantly made whatever changes I recommended. At home (it was at this time that she insisted I abandon my furnished room and move into her apartment) she spent her days arranging for the delight of mine: she would not let me cook, but made meals for me which consumed so much time as to leave none for her painting. If I sat down, she brought

the ashtray; if I picked up a book, she saw to the light. My clothes were miraculously washed and patched, my hair was cut, and even my shoes were shined.

But Linda's conduct carried the seeds of its destruction, for along with everything else her behavior in bed grew more and more fond. True, she was careful not to stir around too much, but she was not afraid to kiss my neck occasionally, and she took a fancy to sleeping with her hand on my thigh. Of course, if I tried to copulate with her, she lay still as a bowl of stagnant jelly, holding even her breath to see what the outcome would be. And with each attempt that failed, her love redoubled.

However, while she was playing, I too was learning a game. One night she made the mistake of putting her head on my shoulder in such a way that her warm breath fell on my ear, and at the same time her hand played idly with the three or four hairs which graced my chest. I waited till I had reason to be sure of myself, and with one quick motion I was on top of her. Naturally she became instantly still, but it was too late: my happiness was soon complete, as was her desolation.

My nascent virility brought that phase to a close: I had demonstrated that I was a man, and that the two of us would no longer live together as children. Now, if ever, she had to summon the courage to become a woman. She made a heroic struggle; and she made it by herself, because she felt that I was not trustworthy anymore. If she could not trust me, how could she love me? Gone was the head on the lap as we rode to school, and gone the kisses stolen when the history of art teacher turned out the light to show slides. At home I did my share of the cooking now, and Linda again had time for her painting. My whims went unsatisfied, and my questions unanswered.

She needed all her energies, because she was trying to be a woman. Each night when we went to bed, we made love desperately; for she tried like a scared child to overcome her aversion to the water. She no longer lay still, but threw her arms about me

and squeezed me until I could have cried out. Though it galled her, she belabored me with caresses; and it was painful to see the attentions which she lavished upon parts of my body which I knew excited her deepest abhorrence. At times a tremor would pass through her, when the loathing became too great for her endurance, and then she would have to stop to recover herself. She would shake her head then, like a dog shaking off flies, and doggedly resume her osculations. No heroine died more deaths than she, and none with greater resolution.

I knew what she was trying to do, and I helped her as I could. I had made the grade, and now she had to. I often tried to imagine what our life would be like if she did make it, and the thought warmed me to my work. Within the Linda that everyone saw, there was always a Linda that wanted to come out: a gentler person, calm and affectionate, quick to understand and sympathize; but that person was restrained by the clenched teeth and thrust back by the fierce whisper.

In the end of January Linda had her period, and it was then that we reached the turning point. One evening she said, "We'll be getting some sleep for the next few days. I'm having my period." She got into bed and curled up on the far side, her back to me. "Go to sleep," she said "and don't touch me."

"Why not?"

"I'm dirty."

"Oh for Jesus Christ's sake! Where did you get a dumb idea like that?"

"We won't argue about it. Just don't touch me."

I didn't argue about it; I slipped in beside her and began our love-making, as I had every night for weeks past. She resisted: pushing me away whenever I clamped myself around her flesh. Rolling her head from side to side on the pillow, she whispered, "Don't, don't," in such a way that there was no telling whether she meant it or not. But I knew that her moment must be now, if there was ever to be one: so I pushed on. And when she dis-

covered that her "dirtiness" had no effect on my oral gallantries, her resistance broke. I could feel love and gratitude surge through her body, so that she was my mistress now as she had never been; and she shared in our pleasures with a real pleasure of her own. And I thought to myself, "She's going to make it. Son of a bitch, she's going to make it."

But she never quite did. And even my ardors deserved fulfillment eventually. When it was over she was still standing on the bridge, looking down into the water: fascinated by the reflection, but fearful of the cold.

After that night, Linda stopped trying: she became Linda-of-the-clenched-teeth again. And who can blame her? Suppose that you are knocking on a door, one of those doors in apartment houses built in the twenties, which has a chain lock, allowing the door to be opened an inch or two but no more. And suppose there is a party inside, with everyone laughing and drinking and messing around. You knock and knock, but no one will open the door for you. And at last you bang on the door, and shout, and throw your whole weight against it, trying to break the chain. And the chain weakens, so that you can see where the links have stretched, and you can imagine where the screws on the other side have pulled away from the jamb, allowing you to stick your hand, almost your head in. And the laughter within swells to a crescendo, and you are frantic. You cry, "Let me in! Let me in!" But the party blasts along: no one sees the door chain stretch terrifically; no one hears your cry. As last you withdraw your arm and look down the tiled hallway. You run a hand over your clothes, and fingers through your hair. You take the service elevator to the street.

TUESDAY

On Tuesday we came home from school at noon, because we had no more classes for the day. We left Jennie to take the bus later, and it gave us an afternoon to ourselves, one afternoon each week which in January we would have spent in love-making. But now it was March, and both of us had other things on our minds.

Linda had her pictures to prepare for the show. To all of us it was a foregone conclusion that she would be one of the winners: that is, that some of her paintings would be chosen to hang in the Philadelphia museum show, and that they might even win a prize there. As for the rest of us, we made various excuses: Jennie said that her work was still in the experimental stage, and I that I had not yet found my medium. But we only meant that we would not devote the relentless work to our art that Linda did.

I was working on something else: I was shopping for a motorcycle. The fall before, on a Saturday of idle cruising around the Main Line looking for girls, I stopped to check the air in what felt like a flat tire; and I found a cardboard flyer tacked to a

telephone pole beside the road. It began demurely enough: "The Amity Motorcycle Club, Locust Grove, Pennsylvania," in a fine black type. But halfway down, emblazoned in red, it proclaimed, "DRAG RACES," and the date given was the next day.

It was just a fallow field on which they had made a straight road a quarter of a mile long, packed earth except for the initial twenty feet, where a slab of concrete had been poured to give traction. The cycles dragged in pairs, and two swarthies stood by with butler's brushes to sweep peeled rubber off the concrete after each heat. Along the sides of the dragstrip the young hoods watched, some lounging on the grass and some sitting in the saddles of their machines. Their flaming pompadours ruffled not a hair in the wind, and their slick leather jackets glistened evilly. Most of them had quarts of beer, from which they drank long, soul-quenching slugs, tilting their heads back to feel its coldness running down their throats. They talked about the contestants as each came up to the line, remarking the machine, the rider, the condition of the track; but they hardly seemed to notice who won, and what times were posted on the board.

At a table so close to the track that sprays of stones fell at his feet each time a pair went off, the starter and judge of the races sat, a wet cigar protruding from the stubble on his face. He did not move except when a pair of cycles came to the line, and then he took the cigar from what must have been his mouth and waved it at the contestants with a small, circular motion. They watched him intently, and although I could see no variation in the movement of the cigar, they seemed to know absolutely when they were to let the clutches fly. He would not watch them leave, nor would he turn around to see who had won. He talked to no one, and he looked nowhere: he was so consumed in the job he was doing.

And there was a cat with a sidecar who drove up and down the road outside, demonstrating the virtues of his combination to a

prospective buyer who sat in the hack. To show what could be done, he drove with the wheel of the hack off the ground, balancing it by the angle of the cycle itself. And not a muscle in his face moved, except to pass a terse word to his passenger; the cigarette hung from his mouth as if glued, and his hands on the bars were like pieces of iron, cast integral with the machine. He was magnificent, fantastic! And so were they all; and so were they all.

I would have pursued motorcycles then, but the weather was getting cold, and I decided to pursue Linda instead. But now spring was coming on: an unseasonable week turned the grass green under sunny walls, and every crocus that opened its orange beak said to me, "Motorcycle." The frost came out of the ground, making traveled paths agonizingly untenable; for when I got my foot stuck in the gumbo, it came away with a suction noise that also said, "Motorcycle."

On Tuesday I completed what I had begun several weeks before: making the rounds of the dealers. I took their names from the classified section of the Philadelphia telephone directory and went about it systematically, placing a limit of \$107.50 on my spending, that being the amount of money I could spare. I judged the machines by two criteria: looks and noise. Actually, my choice was not that wide, because most of the dealers didn't have anything at all for what I had to spend. I didn't mind: I enjoyed just going in and looking around, catching the rhythm of their talk. A lot of it confused me, but I made like I was with it by using the word *shit* whenever I was at a loss. That, the hands forever in the pockets, the unchanging expression, and the slow movements of the body gave me the social polish that I needed.

On Tuesday I found the machine I was after. It was a ten-year-old Jawa, of Czechoslovak manufacture, painted red and lavishly chromed. Its big selling point was that it had two exhaust pipes, and when the dealer fired it up, the Slavic snarl turned

the whole garage into an inferno of noise. Both pipes spat fire, and I knew that the machine must be mine. "Do you want to learn to drive it now?" he asked.

"Hell, no. If I knew how to drive it, you couldn't stop me from blasting out of here with it now. So better get the title and tags straightened out with the twenty-four-hour service first. Don't worry: I'll be back."

When I got home it was five o'clock, and the weather was turning cold again, so that I was glad of the heater in the car. The sun would soon set inconspicuously, because clouds had been seeping eastward for the last hour and now covered the whole sky. Winter reasserted itself, and I could feel that the ground would freeze again during the night.

Tree limbs, blacker barked than in the fall, segmented the façade of the house into shapes more meaningless than the architecture itself; and the stuccoed stone walls, which in sunlight took on warmth, now seemed to forbid entrance. A fitful breeze blew cold through my clothing in unexpected places, and made me consider what Linda would say when she heard I had bought a motorcycle.

She was in the bedroom, finishing up a still life. She did not turn her head as I came in and sat down on the bed. On a table by the wall sat the still life, its onions sprouting now, its potatoes bug-eyed. The folds of the drape only approximated their original positions, and even the crockery looked more used than it had three weeks earlier, when the painting was begun.

But Linda had such eyes as could reconstruct what had been from what was there now. It was this about her painting that made it so much better than the other students': she saw more clearly. Few of us lacked the manual dexterity: we could draw lines and circles; we could squeeze color from tubes, to brush or knife or splatter it on canvas. But when we looked at a potato, the potato was all we saw. Linda saw it completely, almost as

Cézanne would have done. She saw not only that it was generally a solid object, but also the places where it was not solid: where it was flat. She saw exactly how the eyes went backward into space and how they came out again. And she understood the outline as it bulked against a shadow or became insignificant beside an earthenware jug.

She saw the colors, and knew that a potato had not just yellow and brown, but the whole spectrum. In pockets facing the light, she saw the green that was there; and in those facing shadow, she saw the blue. She saw that there was little true brownness to a potato at all, that it was green and yellow mostly, and seared with black. And she saw how it changed the color of objects around it, casting shadows as meaningful as the objects themselves. She saw that colors and shapes were only roughly synchronal, as general patterns came forward shimmering, or retired stolidly backward, like logs under water.

After the initial underpainting was done, her pictures were built up of layers of glazes, so that the surface glowed and took on sensuousness of its own. Had I tried, I could have stood beside her and produced the same picture she did, watching her step by step, so that no one could have told one from the other. But if I stood beside her and tried to paint the same sagging nude, or the same bowl of spoiling fruit, then it was all too easy to see which painting was which.

I watched her work for an hour or more, until it was totally dark outside and Linda's brush began to make faint scraping noises, undetected before. "Hi," I said. "I bought a motorcycle today."

"I thought you would, sooner or later," she said, still without looking at me.

"Well, doesn't it make you happy to know that you were right?"

"Deliriously."

"Oh, come off it, Linda! We can't all be nuns. Maybe it's your nature to paint, but I think it's my nature to ride a motorcycle."

"I wouldn't doubt it for a minute."

"Give it a try, Linda, it'll be fun. When the weather gets warmer, we'll go for trips with it. We'll get on the parkway and blast in town in nothing flat; and we'll go down to the shore weekends. In a couple of weeks it's going to be real motorcycle weather, and we'll have a ball."

"I'm certainly not planning to go anywhere on that *thing*."

"That thing! Why, you haven't even seen *that thing*, for Christ's sake. How do you know what it'll be like? You might even find you'd like it, if you could put your little traumas in your pocket for a while and forget them."

"Ah, but I can't put my traumas in my pocket, so I don't see how I'll be able to ride it, do you?"

"Well, maybe you won't, but I know damned well Jennie will."

*

*

*

In the kitchen Jennie banged pots and swore cheerfully as she prepared dinner. "Hello, Lochinvar. Here, peel an onion. Russell Halpin's coming for dinner." She threw the onion at me and would have followed with the knife, had I not grabbed it first. Grinning, I sat down on the floor and began to peel the onion, so that the linoleum around me was soon littered with the parings.

"Not there, Shithead!" She picked up the broom which stood in the corner and swung it at me. It landed as a rabbit punch because I turned my head to avoid the blow.

"Goddamn you!" I lept up and grabbed her, onion in hand. I pinned her to the floor, and with a free hand rubbed the raw onion around in her hair until she smelled as sweet as a wet meadow in May. "Is Russell Halpin going to love you now!" I pressed my face down close to hers. "You're the best thing I've smelled since last time they dug up the cesspool."

She wriggled fiercely trying to get free, and the exertion made

her pant. With my legs locked around her and my whole body pressed against her to hold her down, I could feel the parts of her syncopate beneath me. It was a silent struggle, and soon her writhings took on a ritual pulse. I no longer grappled to stay on: she did not mean to throw me off.

"Feel my tits against you?" she asked. "All three of them?"

My tongue slid into her open mouth, and for a minute she drew it to her and let it grope there, exploring her secrets. Then she bit down savagely, and I rolled off her, howling with pain. As I flopped across the floor, I had a momentary image of Linda standing in the doorway, leaning against the jamb.

When my head cleared and I could bring myself to sit up, she was gone; and Jennie was again standing at the stove as she had been when I first entered the room. "Thoo ihz gonna hahze twouble talkin for the next foo dayth, Lochinvar," she said.

"You horny bitch," I began eloquently. But there was a sound of footsteps on the stairs, and Jennie flew to the door.

Russell Halpin stepped in. He wore a trench coat with myriad buttons and pockets, its wide collar turned up. The belt was drawn in tightly and cleated against his flat stomach. On his head a beret kept his long black hair in place, and it was cocked at just the angle to suggest knowing opportunism. His legs were encased in the snuggest of Levis, so that the calf would show to advantage when he walked; and they led down to black loafers, polished until the heads on their pennies cried out. At his neck was the white silk evening scarf which he wore from morning till night, knotted to resemble a waterfall pouring incontinently from his throat; and on his hands he wore pigskin gloves, fitted to articulate every knuckle. He and Jennie exchanged their inevitable greeting, a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey, Russell," I shouted, more for Linda's benefit than for his, "this whore's been trying to lay me."

"Fascinating," said Russell. "You must tell me about it sometime, but not just now."

Russell was gay: I mean he was a queer, a fairy, a homosexual.

He had no face: only his hair and clothes showed. Now, 'as he took off his coat to reveal the turtle-necked tubular knit underneath and ran his hand over his chest with a knowing look to me, I wondered how difficult it would be to keep Jennie between us this evening.

In that I knew I could count on Jennie's help, because as long as he was in the apartment, she would be near him. She had been a freshman, along with him, at a university in Pittsburgh, and had there acquired so violent a passion for him that no number of other lovers could requite it. Russell had preserved his chastity, in spite of the best liquor and the most devoted attachment.

At the end of the freshman year, he had decided that he needed a scholarship, and had gone to the dean. However, Russell was more an artist of life than an artist of any graphic medium: he was an undistinguished student. I can picture the interview: the dean in his musty office smelling of stale dottles and an aging man's digestion, surrounded by schedules and memoranda. Enter Russell, in trench coat and pigskin. "I'm from the art school. I'd like a thousand dollars for next year, thank you." He begins his trick of playing with his gloves, as if making sure that every finger is in its proper hole.

The dean rocks back in his swivel chair, leaning on one cheek to cut a sly fart among the leather cushions. "Well, young man, and what makes you think . . ."

Russell didn't get the money, and I understand that such words were spoken before the interview was over as would have made it difficult for him to return the next year, even had he been prepared to pay in full. But especially as he was not, he made a tour of other schools, and at last he came to ours. Here the dean, whose chief qualification for the job thirty years before had been his sexual prowess with a rich spinster, had reached the critical stage in his life: he was no longer useful to women, but when he saw Russell the thought passed through his sodden mind that he might still be of some use to men. Accordingly, he saw that the deserving and talented young student got the assistance he needed.

When Russell transferred, Jennie did too, though she had a hard time explaining to her parents exactly why the new school would be better. As soon as she was established in the Crefeld apartment, she resumed her wooing of Russell, who had no stock residence, but moved around from place to place to suit his inclination and the range of his invitations. Jennie had more than once threatened to have him come live with us, but we knew it was just a bluff, because there was no extra bed room save in with her, and we knew Russell too well for that. Still she wooed him, prepared him elaborate dinners, or got dressed up in what she fancied were fetching clothes, or went without cigarettes herself to buy him a present of Balkan Sobranies.

Tonight Jennie was more than usually amorous, so that Russell ate his dinner, smoked one cigarette out of politeness, and departed quickly. Linda had gone to the bedroom to finish putting frames on some pictures, because it would soon be nine-thirty and she would have to begin her nightly observances. That left me alone in the living room until Jennie had watched Russell's hourglass trench coat disappear down the stairs.

She came back into the apartment and stared at me with some intensity. At length she said, "Now there's a man, Lochinvar. He's got a pecker that you can see right through his jeans."

"I hadn't noticed."

"No, I guess you wouldn't, but let me tell you: it must reach halfway down to his knee."

"Fancy that."

"Yes, I do fancy that, Lochinvar. But as for you, I've never seen your pants bulge at all."

"No, I reckon mine ain't no Cadillac, but it do seem to run right good. Gets me where I want to go. And I don't guess Russell has stood up like a man more than three times in the last ten years."

"Maybe not, but think of being around for one of those three times!"

I began to feel that I would like to turn the conversation. "Frig

Russell. I've got something much more interesting, Jennie: I just bought a motorcycle."

"Just bought a motorcycle?" Instantly she was across the room, sitting in my lap and stroking my hair. "Say, Lochinvar, why didn't you tell me sooner? Give me a ride on it, will you? Give me a ride on it right now."

Take it easy. If you don't get off my lap, there won't be anything left of me for Linda. And it's our night, you know."

Jennie didn't get up; she wound an arm around my neck and made her fingers creep across my face and up into my hair as if they were small animals. "I want a ride tonight, right now. Come on, give me a ride."

I picked her up, heavy as she was, one hand under her knees and the other around her back. I staggered with her to the center of the room and managed to whirl her around once or twice before dropping her on the floor. "I haven't got the motorcycle yet," I said. "You'll have to hold your water till tomorrow."

WEDNESDAY

On Wednesday morning Linda and I did not go to school: we drove in to the Philadelphia museum where we had our forgery class, because it was part of the curriculum at school that every sophomore forge at least one of the masters during the year. I suppose the requirement existed to give us a more rounded knowledge of the world of art.

Most of the pictures valuable enough to be worth forging are in the Johnson Collection, which is not really part of the museum at all. It was left to the city by John G. Johnson, who stipulated that a Philadelphia bank was to be trustee, and that the paintings were to hang forever in his own South Broad Street house. And there they did hang, like Isabella Gardner's Botticellis, even on the backs of bathroom doors. And in a section of town which was once residential but is now given over to grosser interests, no one ventured in to see them, so that the Johnson house was a museum without spectators.

At last the trustees had a solution: the collection was loaned to the Philadelphia museum, and the Johnson house was promptly torn down. For the last thirty years, the collection has been on

loan to the museum, and there it is watched over by guards from the bank. These men, with no great avocation to their way of earning a living, make the best they can of it: there are long periods every morning when no one sets foot in the galleries, and then they have a chance to do some instructive reading. Lift a bench cushion in the long east gallery: there you will find volumes of Mickey Spillane and copies of the *Police Gazette*, dog-eared from long perusal. There are, of course, nude photographs in the magazines, so much more interesting than the nude paintings on the walls.

Many visitors are disillusioned by what they see in the Johnson Collection, for the mind of the man who established it makes more of an impression than the art itself. He bought at least one picture by every first-rate painter acknowledged in his day, but he bought almost no first-rate paintings. The visitor turns away instinctively from the little panel labeled Van Eyck, which sits in a room, holy of holies, all by itself, encased in glass like a tube of deodorant on the television screen; and the close observer sees that the feet belong to St. Francis no more than the brushwork belongs to the master. The visitor is amused by the Bosch, doctored in the eighteenth century with the addition of a black leg that attaches to no torso, but he does not see the picture as a monument to the mastery of painting. And in his disillusion, he may fail to see the two vibrant Puvis de Chavannes, "La Guerre" and "La Paix," so strikingly arranged in the corridor opposite each other, and the handsome portrait of Ernest Hemingway in armor, done by Paolo Veronese.

I had chosen to copy "The Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite" by Poussin, because of all the pictures in the collection and the surrounding galleries, it seemed clearly the most impossible to do, and there would be innumerable excuses for my failure. In it are twenty human figures, not to mention a dozen horses. Draperies billow, clouds burgeon, mountain and ocean glower in the background; and in the foreground an urn lies on its side,

so real that you instinctively put out your hand, for fear that it is about to roll out of the picture and shatter on the stone floor.

My copy was still in the underpainting stage, and would have remained so all year except that I was anxious to get on to the real lesson Poussin had to teach me. It was the secret of painting flesh. Jesus, how that man did it was a miracle, but he had a technique for making flesh so real that beside him Rubens looks like a prig. In "Neptune and Amphitrite" one girl must have served as model for most of the female figures, and you can tell from just looking at her on canvas that old Poussin must have been banging her for all he was worth. He painted her in every posture he could dream up, but it's all the same tomato, holding a scarf or riding piggyback or plain scratching herself. And there you imagine Poussin behind the easel, digging her.

She looks like Linda, except in the face. The body is the same: the same breasts, rubber-round; the same belly, with the waist well above the navel; the same ass, more expressive than a whole Turkish bath by Ingres. But the face is different from Linda, because this tomato looks soft and ready, as if old Poussin just had to twirl his moustache and say the word. Linda doesn't look that way.

Linda was in another gallery, forging half of a diptych by Rogier van der Weyden. And when I had looked at Poussin's tomato until I could stand it no longer, until I felt I must touch the reality, I snuck in to Linda. She was working carefully and getting a remarkable reproduction. She applied the paint with mincing strokes, working it in as van der Weyden must have done, so that the brushwork was nowhere visible. 'The loin cloth Christ wore on the cross she had imitated not only in shape, but had even given it that lack of substance which the original had, so that you had only to look at the painting to know that such a cloth might exist in the world of art and the world of religion, but never in the world of nature. The bones at the bottom she had only roughed in, but already they were menacing and true.

"Hey, Linda, how you going to peddle half a picture when you're done? You'll have to paint another panel with the mother and that usher that's holding her up. Then you can do business with Duveen." I put my hand affectionately on her left cheek.

"It's work time, not play time," she said, not looking at me but reaching down to remove the hand. "I'm busy working, and you should be, too."

"Yes, but I keep getting distracted. I start thinking about you here in the next room, all lonely and by yourself, and I am so moved that I just have to come in and cheer you up."

"I'm perfectly cheerful, thank you."

"Yes, but I feel such pity, when I think of you all alone in here."

"Pity for me? Don't waste your time. I'm perfectly content. You don't need to stay here another minute."

"But I do. You put on a bold front" (I reached for her bold front, but she cracked my knuckles with the edge of her pallet knife) "but I know you're just thinking about me all the time, wishing I was here."

She whirled upon me, her cheeks blazing, her hands making small convulsive movements with brush and knife. "Look, will you go away and leave me alone?" she hissed through her teeth. "You think you're funny, but you're just disgusting, disgusting. Go away and leave me alone."

I went back to Poussin and his tomato.

*

*

*

At noon I drove Linda to school. We ate lunch together in the cafeteria, she at one end of an empty table and I at the other. Naturally, I tried to be conversational and pleasant, but she would not answer me; so that we went to our afternoon sculpture class on no better footing than we had been in the morning.

The afternoon dragged along. We were working in plasteline from a live model, always an unpleasant job at best. The clay has a greasy texture, and the oil in it permeates your skin, so

that additional material soon sticks to you as readily as to your work; and you have to resort to tools, losing the feeling of sculpture altogether. What is worse, the clay is olive-drab color, so that, unless you are very skillful, wonderful skin and cascading hair tend to become lumps of greasy mud, undifferentiated from each other. With tools you scratch its surface, trying to gain some variety; but it peels away in unexpected places, and you must begin again.

On mine, the problems were complicated by a loose armature. When I was just beginning to get something of what I wanted, I decided to cut under the arms to make a stronger horizontal accent. The work rose from its base, flipped off the stand, and landed headfirst on the floor. When I picked it up, not only was there a spearmint label stuck to its hair, but the impact had altered the proportions of the whole figure, so that instead of resembling the lithe model, it looked like a Nordic fertility goddess. And one metal end of the armature protruded from the back of its head. I looked at the model to see where to begin repairing the ravages; but a break was called, and she stepped down from the platform and collapsed in a chair. It wasn't my afternoon, I decided; or at least it wasn't my afternoon yet.

I was waiting for the time when school would be over and I could go home; and when it came, I rushed for the car. Jennie was there ahead of me, full of entreaties. "Let me go too, Loch-invar. Come on, let me go too."

"Where are we going? What's the big rush?"

"We're going to get the motorcycle, aren't we? That's all you were talking about at breakfast, and it's what you've had on your mind all day, isn't it? Let me go too?"

"Where's Linda, I wonder?"

"Don't change the subject. She's over at the main building, screwing around with her pictures for the show tomorrow. She'll be there another half-hour at least. Come on, let me go with you."

"I might get the motorcycle this afternoon, at that."

"You might! Don't give me that crap! You know you're not going any place but there, as soon as you can dump the two of us at home. But let me come along. I won't be any trouble, honest I won't, Lochinvar. I'll stay in the background and simper and be demure as hell."

"No, Jennie, I don't think I'd better. You know motorcycle dealers are pretty rough places. Lots of pretty coarse talk going on that you wouldn't want to hear. Not for the ladies."

"I want to come." By this time she was pulling my hair, so that my head hung over into the back seat, and she was threatening to guillotine me in the adam's apple. "Let me come too."

"No, it's a rough place. You might get raped in a place like that."

"Is that a promise? I've always wanted to get raped."

"Trouble is that you always beat them to the punch. If you were a little more retiring, you might stand a better chance."

She let go of me, and I turned around to look at her. Her big, bony face was wistful now, and her wild, stiff hair radiated from her like a rooster beaten in a fight. Even her eyebrows were ruffled, but her paint-messed hands were lifted in supplication.

"No," I said, "I don't think I'd better take you along. I'll be home after a while and give you a ride."

She lay back in the seat, beaten. "O.K."

"I want to get the hang of it first myself. I've never driven one before, and I'd be scared to take a rider the first time. I might wreck it. As soon as I get the feel of it, I'll come get you."

"You just want to have the first go at it all by yourself."

"Maybe I do," I said. But Linda was coming across the parking lot, which meant that we could go.

I left the car at the apartment and dressed in as warm clothes as I could find, because it would be a cold trip home, and I expected to make it a long one. "May we expect you for dinner, Sir?" asked Linda.

"Not unless something goes wrong."

At the dealer's, the Jawa stood in the middle of the floor, plates on it and ready to go. He had gone over the bike with a rag, getting dust off paint and chrome, so that now my hundred-dollar motorcycle gleamed like a living thing, and the treads of the tires looked ready to eat up road. I suffered him to show me which controls did what, but would not allow his suggestion that he ride me around the block. "I'll make it. I have a feeling I was born for a Jawa. And I've got to make it by myself sometime."

He started it up and rolled it out of the shop for me, as if fearful that I might hit some other machine on the way out. In the street, the exhausts made less noise than they had in the enclosed space, but I consoled myself with the idea that I could run a crowbar through the mufflers and they would be good as ever. Remembering one maxim I had learned from bicycling, that the secret of easy steering is speed, I revved it up and let the clutch fly: I was off! A lamppost went rapidly by, and a parked car almost ran me down; but soon I had found fourth gear, and staying on course was no longer such a problem. The speedometer read fifty-five, and green, yellow, and red lights went by me in glittering profusion. Occasionally a car honked, and once I heard a faint whistle; but I didn't let them disturb me, for my one thought was to get the machine out of the nasty traffic, to try it on the open road and see what it would do.

Seventy-five was the best it would register, up hill and down, through towns and open country, going, going. I wrung it out, twisted the throttle until my hand ached and my neck was sore from flattening myself along the tank. The headlight picked up blurred objects in the darkness: trees, cars, houses seemed insubstantial, like puffs of fog that lie along country roads on summer evenings. They were no sooner seen than gone, and all that I left for them was noise and a thin trail of smoke from the two-stroke engine. I found that stop signs could be slighted, and curve signs ignored completely, so that my foot pegs dragged along the con-

crete and I could imagine the sparks that must be flying somewhere, somewhere. But not where I was going, because the sparks went back, and I went forward, looking for a new test, a greater challenge. The uphill slowed me down, and once or twice I had to shift into third gear; but the downhill compensated, for there I flew. Gentle bumps in the road hit me like savage body punches, and humpbacked bridges took my breath away. Trees stretched their bare arms to me longingly, only to be spurned by my exhausts.

I do not know how long I had been gone when, sudden as a snake in a rock pile, the cold bit me. The temperature must have been in the thirties, and I had only sweaters and thin wool mittens on. But just as quickly as I had known that it was time to go, I now knew that it was time to stop; and a crossroad up ahead seemed my logical destination. The sign read:

| | |
|--------------|----|
| New Hope | 7 |
| Philadelphia | 34 |

I turned the cycle round and started for home.

Jennie jumped up when she heard me on the stairs. "You'd think I was Russell Halpin, the way you come running," I said. "Calm down. I've got no twelve-inch beetle to dangle in your face."

"Let's go for a ride, Lochinvar. You promised me we would."

"Get me a cup of tea first. I'm cold."

Dutifully, she made a cup of tea and set it before me at the kitchen table. She watched in silence while I drank it, and carefully washed the cup and put it away. "Get a coat or you'll freeze," I said.

"You take care of the driving, and I'll ride." In nothing but one of her tight-skirted, sleek dresses, she led me to the door.

On the sidewalk the wind whistled determinedly down the lane of trees, and I had to kick the machine several times before it would start. "Let's go, Lochinvar. I won't feel warm till I hear it run."

At last it bellowed and we climbed on. We bounced off the sidewalk into the street, and I twisted the handle like a drunkard drawing beer, and we lept away. Again it was lampposts and parked cars, because the extra weight on the back wheel made the steering light. "Move your ass up closer to me, before we hit a goddamn tree," I shouted.

From the start she rode like a winner. Her skirt was pulled up till you could practically see the hair; and when we went around corners so that the pegs scraped, she put her foot down to touch the road surface and yowled with delight. The only advice she gave me was, "Faster, go faster," and she took the bumps with her weight on her feet, as if she had been riding motorcycles all her life. She seemed impervious to the cold, as if the engine's heat were directed at her, and as if it were enough.

At last we found the apartment again and staggered up the stairs, her arm around my waist and mine on hers. At the top, before opening the door, we stopped to look at each other for a long minute. The only light came faintly from below, showing us little but each other's tear-streaked, scarlet cheeks. "That was fantabulous, Lochinvar," she said, looking at me through dilated eyes. "I'm going to have to have a real ride someday."

"I think you are," I said, "and soon."

THURSDAY

"I don't care what you say, I'm not going to school or anywhere else on that motorcycle," Linda said. We were all sitting around the kitchen table having breakfast, and I had suggested that it was about time to put the car up on blocks till next winter, because the motorcycle was all we would be needing now. I wasn't sure how all three of us could get on it, but I knew there must be a way, and I thought we might find it on our trip to school that morning.

"I don't see what your objection can be," said Jennie. "It's not raining very hard, and it's supposed to clear up by afternoon."

"Yes," I said, "and if we drove fast enough, we wouldn't even get wet. You just have to duck when you see a raindrop coming and turn on the gas a little harder."

"You two can go that way or any way you want to, but I'm not going," said Linda. "I can perfectly well take the bus. I'm quite accustomed to it."

"You're accustomed to it?" I asked. "Why, you haven't taken the bus since I've lived here."

"No, not since you insinuated yourself here. But I haven't forgotten where to get on and off. I'd like to start taking the bus again. It would be more restful than riding in the car with you two screaming and fighting all the time."

Jennie said, "Well go ahead then. Take the bus."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "You keep your mouth shut and let me handle this." I turned to Linda and tried to look her in the eye, but as always she looked away. "Linda, listen to me, for Christ's sake. You've never even ridden on a motorcycle. Now why don't you just try it? Who knows, you might even like it."

"I'll go on the bus. You can go any way you like: I don't care."

"O.K.," I said, feeling tired, "we'll take the car today."

"Noble Lochinvar," said Jennie, "giving up his steed for his lady love. I'm deeply touched to see such chivalry in the twentieth century."

"You'll be deeply touched, all right, if you don't shut up and eat."

At school we had English first period. The teacher came in late and set his books wearily on the desk in front of the room. "Today," he said, "we will finish our discussion of *Hamlet*, so that we can move on to something else."

We were reading a play called *Hamlet* by an author named Shakespeare. It was written a long time ago, and this is how the plot goes: When the scene opens, this cat Hamlet is dragging his ass around the castle where he lives. It seems his old man crapped out and his old lady jumped for his uncle right away. Hamlet's all shook about it, and he gets more shook when the old man's ghost makes the scene and says the uncle laid him out so he could grab the crown and hump the queen, Hamlet's mother.

Hamlet is big buds with this other cat, Horatio, and he's got a tomato named Ophelia on the string, but all he can think

about is the way his uncle crumped his old man. Then he hears the queen wants to see him, and he figures maybe he can straighten things out if he humps her himself. But the trouble is there's a peeping Tom, Ophelia's father, digging it all from behind a curtain. And when Hamlet sees he can't stick his old lady, he sticks Polonius instead.

So the tomato jumps in the river, and her brother makes it and sticks Hamlet (with a poison sword; he's not a fairy). Hamlet sticks the brother and the uncle with the same sword, and the queen goes on a bender and drinks poisoned punch. In the end they all crap out except Horatio, and he's got nothing left to do but play a little pocket pool and pull the curtain. It's called a tragedy beause nobody gets laid but the uncle.

"So what's with this guy?" I said, interrupting the teacher with as loud a voice and as obnoxious an accent as I could muster. "Man, he is really out of it."

"What do you mean, 'really out of it'?" asked the teacher dryly. "You must remember that this masterpiece was written in the beginning of the seventeenth century, and that there will naturally be some archaisms in it."

"I mean, he don't jump to the beat. Here he has it made with this dish Ophelia, and all he's thinking about is who nailed his old man."

"Who nailed his old man?"

"Yeah. And another thing: dig this 'to be or not to be' bit. Man, Sartre covered that one way back."

"But this play was written even before Sartre."

"Man, before Sartre there was nothing. 'And God said, "Let there be light," and there was Sartre.' "

Other students entered the discussion: "Why don't we read Sartre?"

"Yeah, let's get with him and can this old stuff."

"Sartre's got something to say."

The teacher waited for us to quiet down; but when he was able

to speak, his voice told us that we were well on our way to success. "We don't read Sartre because this is a course in English literature, not French philosophy. If you want to read Sartre, you can do it on your own time, but we can't waste any more time with him here."

"Waste time? What do you mean, waste time?" The hulla-balloo began again, and it carried us through to the end of the period without reaching that fabulous goal of finishing *Hamlet*.

Linda and I left the room together, and I looked at her to see if she approved my performance. But except for the usual tension signs (particularly the tightening of the lip when I came near her), her face did not register that she had been listening. I thought perhaps her mind was occupied with the show being judged downstairs at that moment. "The judges will be all done in an hour or two," I said.

"Of course they will. So what?"

"Don't you care whether one of yours is chosen or not?"

"They'll make their choice the way they make it. There's nothing we can do about it."

"O.K., have it your way. I just thought you might be wondering."

"Wondering wouldn't change anything, would it?"

And damned if she didn't mean it: I watched her in painting class all morning long. Many of the other students didn't even pretend to work, but muttered to themselves in little knots around the room; and the teacher himself seemed to understand our excitement: he broke the model's pose often and for long periods, so that she was more often sitting around in her bathrobe, smoking a cigarette, than she was up on the stand. The studio hummed with wondering students, anxious students, fearful students; and even I, who had every reason to know better, found myself wishing and hoping along with the rest.

The judges would take at most a dozen paintings, and perhaps one or two pieces of sculpture from the most advanced classes.

Those works would be on show in the museum of art for two whole weeks, during which time one of them might even be bought. And to most of us, who couldn't give our paintings away, the thought of a painting sold was next thing to a reserved place in the Museum of Modern Art. So we hummed, we buzzed; we hardly took brushes in our hands from ten o'clock to noon.

But Linda seemed to work, if anything, harder than usual. She answered the nervous jibes of others pleasantly but shortly, and she allowed nothing to interfere with her concentration. It was only the second day of a new pose, but by the end of the morning her painting was half finished, and it showed promise of being one of the best things she had done.

The bell rang and there was a general rush for the door. The judging would be over now: the decisions would be made, and the pictures to go to Philadelphia would have a red star pasted to the frame. "Let's go see," I said to Linda. "You might be a winner."

"You can go if you want to," she said calmly. "I'm hungry, and I think I'll beat the rush in the cafeteria."

I looked at her in dumb disbelief. But she was evidently serious, so I mastered myself to meet her and said, "I can wait as long as you can. I haven't got as much to expect as you do." I followed her to lunch, and we ate half our meal in a nearly empty room before there was a surge of shouting students at the door, with Jennie in the van.

"You won! You won!"

"Who did? Me?"

"No, not you, Shithead. Linda won. They took the still life *and* the figure: you know, the one with the legs crossed. I think you're the only sophomore to get taken, and they took *two* of your things!" She gave Linda a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Jesus, isn't it great? *Your* pictures will be in the art museum, along with Rouault and Cézanne and all the rest."

Linda leaned back in her chair, smiling as I had not seen her do in weeks. "Yes, it is very nice," she said. "Thank you for coming and telling me, Jennie."

I took her hand, which lay on the table, squeezed it, and congratulated her. "You deserved it more than anyone else," I said.

She smiled at me and squeezed my hand back, and thus we sat while the other students crowded around with their compliments. I felt the flesh of her in my hand and saw the smile on her face and wondered how there could ever have been anything wrong between us. But soon she recollected herself, and her hand and smile were withdrawn: she did not look at me again during the meal.

*

*

*

When we got home late in the afternoon, Jennie and I decided to go for another ride on the motorcycle. This time I persuaded her to put on a few more clothes: although the sky had cleared since morning, the weather had turned colder, so that even in the car coming home we had shivered in our winter coats. Not to do anything halfway, Jennie responded by putting on everything she owned, so that she appeared in the hall looking like a ball of cotton candy. "O.K., Lochinvar, you can wipe that fool grin off your face. It's time to mount the steed."

We went outside, where I had leaned the Jawa against the house the night before: and there it stood, a touch of frozen rain on its headlight and tank. I rolled it away from the wall, closed the choke, turned on the gas line, made sure it was in neutral, and kicked. But the engine turned over unwillingly, as if bent upon resting till warmer weather came. I kicked again, but there was still no response. The wind came around the corner of the building and shot up our pants legs; it buffeted our collars and made our noses suddenly run. I began the motorcyclist's old routine: kicking and kicking, trying every throttle position, open-

ing and closing the choke, banging the tickle button till gas flowed, pushing the key to make sure the ignition was on. But all I got was a barked shin.

"Talk to it," said Jennie. "Maybe it just wants to hear your voice."

"I can't. I don't know Czechoslovakian." Dispiritedly, we leaned the machine back against the wall and trudged upstairs, I limping on my bruised leg.

The evening dragged itself out like the day after Christmas. After dinner I practiced throwing a knife at the closet door, and Linda gessoed masonite panels for future paintings. From the kitchen we could hear Jennie noisily cleaning her teeth with my brush. In good time it was nine-thirty, time for Linda to start getting ready for bed.

At ten-thirty I went in to her, because it was our night again; and from ten-thirty-five until ten-forty-seven we made love. Or I should say I made love, because she just lay there and looked at the black ceiling, across which cars passing in the street threw occasional patterns of the window's mullions. With my hand on her bare breast and my leg across her hips, she said, "Duchamp creates the illusion of action in a single panel." But I knew it was just one of her games, and I didn't answer. I moiled on, going through the regular routine of operations that every boy learns. But had I cried until her rubber stomach was saturated with my tears, it would have made no more difference than if a house fly had settled there, arranged its antennae, and departed: Linda was in another world.

And when at last I lay still on top of her, so that we could hear the night noises of the house and the music Jennie always turned on at such times, she said, "Are you done?"

The feeling of revulsion was in me now, the feeling that was stronger every time. It was almost a physical disgust, such as Linda must have felt herself. Jesus Christ, I thought. Jesus

Christ, son of a bitch, goddamn, fuck it all, I'm done. I am done. I have done. I will be *done*.

"I'll get you a towel," I said.

Out in the hall the lights were still on. I saw Jennie staring at me from the living room; and I stared back, suddenly conscious that I was naked. "Top of the morning to you," I said.

I went to the bathroom, took the largest towel I could find, and soaked it in hot water in the sink. I needed the hottest water and the largest towel, because I was about to do a real washing, to wash myself clean and free. Afterward, I thought, I would sleep on the sofa; and in the morning I would find myself a rooming house somewhere near school.

When the towel was soaked and steaming, so that I knew it would drive needles of pain through me, I was ready to begin; but turning, I saw Jennie in the door. "Had enough?" she said.

She took the towel from the sink, but it was so hot she could hardly touch it. "Don't do that, Lochinvar," she said. "That's a Linda trick." She pulled the stopper, emptied out the hot, and ran cold until the towel was body warm. She washed me with care until all trace of Linda was removed.

She took me in her hands, but I said, "Wait. I have a piece of business still to finish." I took a dry towel from the rack and followed her down the hall. Passing Linda's room, I threw the towel in where it would land on the bed, and I closed the door.

In Jennie's room, she lay down on her bed. "Take off your dress," I said. I want to feel those three tits against my hairy chest."

She looked crestfallen. "I don't have three tits," she said. "I just said that to lead you on."

"Well, we'll settle for two. But take off the dress, and make it quick."

It was a moment of sweetness, a moment of such tenderness as I cannot describe. But I will say that it was like putting your bare foot into a puddle of mud that has been warmed by sun-

light. It is a shocking experience, and your first reaction is to withdraw your foot and stare at it, aghast at its contamination. But soon you put your foot back in the mud, and you even slosh it around there, feeling the warmth that oozes between your toes. You feel the mud penetrating everywhere, under your toenails and around the scabby creases of your ankle. You feel the mud accepting all of your foot, glad to caress it, unafraid. And looking down you see a drop of dirty oil on the surface, and dead caterpillars and a diseased leaf. But they do not induce your usual revulsion: you are happy with them as part of the warm mud, so sweet is reconciliation.

When it was over, I was suddenly elated. "I'm inspired," I cried. "I'm going to paint a famous picture. Quick, my easel and brushes!"

"Not till I've had mine, you don't," she said.

I said, "Women don't do that." But I bit her nose savagely and wiggled what was left of me to wiggle. It was enough. But strangely, neither Jennie nor I painted a picture that night. We fell asleep.

FRIDAY

In the early morning I awoke knowing that something wasn't right. The whitewashed walls were the same, and so was the arched window; but the bed must have been changed around in the room, because walls and window did not relate to each other properly. Overhead was the light hanging from its cord, but someone had taken off the shade during the night, so that it was now just a bare bulb. Running my eyes down the wall, I saw that the still life was missing, as was the table on which it had sat; but perhaps Linda had put them away. However, the chair on which I dumped my clothes was gone, and the bureau was different, and (I rolled to see who was in bed beside me) Linda wasn't there. I was in Jennie's room.

I remembered the night now, and what had happened. For a long time I lay perfectly still, staring at the ceiling like Linda; but my thoughts were different from what hers would have been. She would have been "marking the figures on an Indian chest": thinking about the best angle for the new pose of the model in painting class, considering how Duchamp was destroyed by the advent of movies, wondering whether the kitchen spigot was

dripping. But I lay very still and no thought entered my mind, but only a feeling of relief: the relief of not having to pretend anymore, of not having to lie and fake my way through every day and every situation; a relief much like that which comes after a hot bath, when we can begin anew.

Jennie's head lay on the pillow beside me. Her coarse hair fanned out around her like thistles in morning sun, and I could see where her bony body made triangular contours under the blankets. I smiled: I grinned until the sides of my face hurt, and then I jabbed her in the ribs with my elbow. "Wake up," I said. "It's play time."

We made love then, not with the violence and haste of the night before, but with the gentleness that morning brings. I learned her body: its hidden softnesses as well as its sudden terminations. I savored her lips, and the determined hairs around her nipples. I wrapped myself in the hard muscles of her thighs. And when it was over, we lay, almost without breathing, in each other's arms until we heard noises in the next room. We knew we would have to get up and face Linda.

"Get dressed and go get me my clothes," I said. "I feel modest."

It was my turn to make breakfast that morning, and eggs were frying by the time Linda appeared. She came up to me where I stood at the stove, put her arm around my waist, and kissed me on the cheek. "Good morning," she said. "Sleep well?"

Now in the five months I had known Linda, she had never kissed me good morning that I could remember, not even in my good old impotent days. "Yes, thank you," I said stiffly. "*We* slept very well."

"The hell we did," said Jennie. "We're as rested as prize fighters after fifteen rounds, aren't we, Lochinvar?"

"Yes, well, that's the way it is," said Linda brightly, sitting down at the table. "Turn my eggs this morning, will you please, darling?"

"Who's darling around here?" asked Jennie.

"Well it wouldn't be you, would it?" She turned to me again. "And I'd like two pieces of toast this morning, if it isn't too much trouble."

"No, not at all."

I sat down at the table weakly, wondering what would come next. Linda, contrary to her custom, had brought no reading to the table with her this morning; and she seemed as ready to talk as any bourgeois housewife on a sunny morning. But I could see that it was costing her much: her hands moved more often than they need have done to perform the operations of the hour; and when she was not actually talking she gazed intensely at her plate, as if there were a blemish on it that she hoped to eradicate by the power of her eyes. Jesus, I thought, she's going to blow sky high, like a cherry bomb: there won't be anything left but little shreds of red paper.

She twitched violently and looked up at us. Recalling herself with great effort, she put on a smile and said, "I haven't seen the show at school yet. Did any of your pictures get chosen, Jennie? No? That's too bad. But you know how arbitrary these things are, and I'm sure that if the judges had been different, the selections would have been different too."

"Isn't she sweet?" said Jennie, turning to me.

"Let's talk about something else," I said. "It's been a long time since we've been down to the Gelded Cage, I mean the Gilded Cage, hasn't it? Why don't we go?"

"Because it isn't open till evening," said Jennie.

"I think it's a lovely idea," said Linda, "but I've got to be at school for the prize awarding tonight. Why don't we go down tomorrow?"

"We'll go on the motorcycle," said Jennie.

"Let's wait and see about that," Linda said. "Pour me another cup of coffee, would you please?"

I don't know how I got through that Friday morning. I was

with Linda in classes, and she clung to me like Virginia creeper. She watched my painting with rapt attention, as if each brush stroke were a marvel; and she neglected her own more accomplished work to the point where the teacher twice told her to get back to her easel.

The other students tittered, and I looked around, expecting to see frigid disdain on Linda's face, but instead she was grinning. She squeezed my hand and said, "Never mind what they say. We're the only ones who really count, aren't we?"

She followed me to lunch, where we met Jennie, and the three of us sat down heavily at a table. We were soon joined by Russell Halpin, without a tray: he seemed to need someone to buy him lunch. "May I join you?" he asked, slipping his beret into his pocket and pulling his gloves off a finger at a time.

"Here, Russell, here's a buck," I said. "Go get yourself some lunch."

"Oh, thank you. I seem to have forgotten my wallet today. Must have left it at home on the bureau. I'll pay you back tomorrow."

"That's all right. Never mind. Just eat somewhere else, will you?"

The three of us ate our meal in deathly silence. Once or twice Linda tried to punctuate it with some sprightly remark, but it went unanswered, and the silence closed in thicker than before. The chattering and laughing from the other tables only accentuated our strangulation; and long after we had finished eating, we still sat over our cold dishes, staring into distance.

At last Linda got up. "We've got wood class now," she said. "Coming?"

"You go ahead. I'll be along in a minute," I said, leaving her nothing to do, as she was already on her feet, but to pick up her tray and go.

When the cafeteria door closed behind her, Jennie and I dared to look at each other; and I grabbed her knee under the table

and squeezed it as if it were the one rung of a ladder that kept me from tumbling backward into space. "Jesus," I said, "let's go home."

We got our trays into the slop door somehow, and somehow we got in the car and wheeled it home, in spite of our mad clutchings. Traffic swirled around us, and I suppose that the usual streets and buildings went by. But as if the windows had been made of smoked glass, I was aware of nothing that went on outside the car, and we must have reached home on blind luck alone. We ran up the stairs, found a key that fitted the lock, and tumbled into bed.

By midafternoon we felt better, and we got up and took a shower together. "Christ, Lochinvar, you stink," she said.

"If I stink, it's you I stink of. You're no goddamn rose yourself." I stuck out my tongue, and she rammed the bar of soap into my mouth.

"That's what happens to little boys who use nasty language."

I put my face under the shower head to rinse out my mouth, spitting the soapy water at her. When I could at last talk I said, "O.K., mother, you just wait. I'll go back to shacking with Linda; she wouldn't do a dirty trick like that."

"There's lots of things Linda wouldn't do, like taking a shower the way we are now. If you go back to her, I'll just get Russell drunk enough some time, and then I won't need your services anyway."

"You couldn't get Russell drunk enough to take you on. He'd pass out first." We were out of the shower by now, and I snapped her ass with the wet end of a towel. "Let's see if the cycle will start," I said.

It did, for the day was much warmer than Thursday and the sun was still high. We blasted off, heading in the general direction of Valley Forge, because from some vague, childhood recollection I knew that the roads there were full of ups and downs, curves, and few cars, making it an ideal place to test the Jawa

some more. We were met at the entrance by a stone pillar with a bronze plaque commemorating Baron von Steuben. The good Baron had been cast into the plaque in relief, and he was executed in such an ingenious way that all the rain water that fell on the plaque ran toward his nose and thence down his chin. Through the years, the excess water had turned his lips and chin a brighter green than the rest of his countenance, giving the illusion of a runny nose.

The good Baron struck us so funny that we had to stop the motorcycle to enjoy the joke with him, now that we saw how cold winters at Valley Forge really were. Jennie laughed, and I laughed, and soon we had to turn off the motorcycle and lie down on the grass to laugh. We lay there for some minutes, looking at the Baron and laughing. Valley Forge was funnier than Willow Grove Park, we decided: we must see some more of it.

But the cycle would not start. I went through the kicking routine, and then Jennie held my coat while I went through it again. I tried the key, the throttle, the tickle button, the choke; a dozen times I made sure it was in neutral: but it would not start. I left Jennie standing by a less funny Baron von Steuben and pushed the cycle up a hill in the direction we had come. The balance of the machine seemed uncertain, and once it fell away from me, pulling me over on top of it because I didn't let go. I cursed, righted it, and went on climbing the interminable hill. My breath came in hoarse gasps, and I pushed until I knew I would fall down if I took another step. Then I stopped, clawing fiercely at the handbrake for fear I might lose an inch of what was so hard won. I gasped until my breath settled down to a stifled wheezing, and pushed again.

When I reached the top, I turned the cycle around toward Jennie, made very sure the key was on (it had been on all the time), put the machine in second, compressed the clutch, and let it roll until the speedometer read thirty-five. I let out the

clutch and was almost thrown over the handlebars, but the engine started instantly, as if to say, "What's all the shit about?" Triumphant, I coasted back down to Jennie and wheeled the machine around. But when she jumped on and we were set to go, the engine died.

"There was a service station a couple of miles back," she said. "Maybe he can figure out what the trouble is."

The sight of the hill up which the cycle had again to be pushed was unbelievable. A stone wall such as Du Ponts erect to keep *hoi polloi* out of their mausoleums could not have looked more forbidding. But there was nothing to do but get the Jawa back up it again, and we started off. However, when we came to the steep part, I noticed that it seemed easier than before, and looking back I saw that Jennie was pushing too. I stopped and kissed her, and we pushed on without a word, so complete was our understanding.

We rode down hills on the cycle, and it rode us up. The sun set over bare trees, and the cold of the road surface infected our thin shoes, while down our backs the sweat rolled in tired ribbons, gluing our shirts and making them itch. Our knuckles ached from cold, for we had forgotten to bring gloves, and our red noses ran like the Baron's. But under our coats the heat was intense, so that we did not know whether to cry "I'm cold" or "I'm hot." We said nothing, but pushed on in the knowledge that at least we suffered the same aches and the same itches, and that we suffered them together. It was almost fully dark by the time we topped the last hill and saw the service station in the valley below. We coasted down and threaded in beside the pumps.

"Out of gas, eh?" said the attendant.

"Why, no, I don't think so," I said.

He unscrewed the cap and peered inside the tank. "Yep, I think you are. There's only a little bit left in here," he said. He stepped back and examined the machine critically. "But say,"

he continued pleasantly, “you should have flipped the gas line switch to reserve. That’s always good for ten or fifteen more miles.”

We didn’t care. We knew that it would be night soon, and we could go to bed.

SATURDAY

By the time we got up in the morning, Linda had finished her breakfast and was setting up a new still life in the living room. She was using the same pottery jugs, but the vegetables had been discarded and five apples, which must have been bought at the store that morning, were to replace them. As ever, she worked with care: arranging the fruit, standing back to look, moving it a hair, standing back again. She turned each apple, looking for the side that would give variety of shape and color; she pulled at the backdrop, adding a fold here and taking one out there. And if she seemed a little peevish about it today, there was still no doubt about her determination.

"I don't see how you can spend so much time on a jug and an old sheet," I said, stretching in the doorway. "I'd get bored."

"Good morning," she said cheerily. "It's just a peculiarity of mine. I don't really know what I do find so fascinating about it."

"I'm sorry I didn't pick you up last night after the awards."

"Oh, that's all right. It didn't matter at all."

"You mean you can do perfectly well without my help, don't you?" I was almost hoping that she would revert to her old behavior.

"No," she said, "that isn't what I mean. It would have been nice if you'd come."

"We had trouble with the motorcycle."

"Yes, I understand perfectly. Don't worry about it."

Jennie joined us. "Painting in here today, Linda?"

"Yes, I thought it would be a nice change. I can get a better light on it, I think. And you two can be around, doing whatever you've got on your minds. I'd like the company."

"Jennie and I are going to a motorcycle race today."

"Oh, you are? That's too bad. I guess I'll just have to work by myself then."

"You never minded that before."

"No, I never did, did I? But we're all going to the Cage tonight, aren't we?"

"Yes, on the motorcycle," said Jennie.

"Well, all right then, on the motorcycle if you insist," said Linda laughing. But after that she fell silent, and appeared to be concentrating hard on her work. She brought out one of her gessoed masonite panels, put it on her easel, and set fresh paints on her pallet.

The atmosphere in the apartment was oppressive that morning, as if the weather outside were evil, although actually the sun was shining for what promised to be a May day in March. But Jennie and I ate breakfast in virtual silence; and as if in concord with the spirit of the time, the egg yokes broke and the toast burned. For a long time after the meal was over we sat at the kitchen table, neither of us daring to go to the living room and face Linda, who would be sure to smile cheerfully at us.

Finally I said, "Come on. The plaster must be dry on your mosaic by now. Let's go see how many pieces fall out when we take the paper off. The combination of me for a subject and you for an artist should be really frantic."

Jennie tried a smile and managed a whispered "go to hell." We dared the living room.

In keeping with Jennie's Rouault phase, she was manufacturing what she called mosaics. She made a frame and laid it on the floor over a sheet of Manila paper, on which she had drawn an approximation of what she wanted. With broken bits of stained glass which she had stolen from a house being torn down near school, she made colored patterns on top of the drawing; then she poured plaster over the whole thing until it filled the frame, and let it sit on the floor till it hardened. After a couple of days she pulled the paper off and scraped the glass until all the plaster seepage was off it, and it took on a glow faintly reminiscent of a mosaic. In this state it might last half an hour, while we all walked around and admired it; and then she got out the black paint and blackened all the plaster between the pieces of glass, to get what she called "my stained glass effect." This last technique neatly destroyed whatever qualities there had been in the piece, for it took all brilliance out of the colors and made them seem to run together, like a vegetable soup too long on the stove. She would then lean it proudly against the wall and look at it approvingly. "Isn't it beautiful?" she would say. "Doesn't it grab the hell out of you?"

This morning her mosaic was, as usual, in the middle of the floor, where everyone had had to step around it for three days, amid loud imprecations. This one had been an attempt at portraiture in profile, and though I had been model for the original sketch, it was easy to guess that the finished effort would more nearly resemble "The Old King." When she had been laying out the glass, she had even said something about a flower in the hand.

We picked up the piece with the Manila paper still stuck to it and took it over to the window, ostensibly to get a better light, but really to be as far away from Linda as possible. There we worked like furtive animals, peeling and scraping, watching as the picture slowly appeared. It was bad: the plaster had been poured on too rapidly, so that it pushed the glass around, mak-

ing the plaster mullions too large in some places, and clustering the glass particles together in others. In the places where the glass was bunched, half of it fell out when we pulled the paper away because it had nothing to grip it on the sides, and because there had been air bubbles in the plaster which did not rise and smooth out properly.

Linda came and looked over our shoulder. "That's too bad," she said, "but it can't work out every time, can it? Why don't you salvage the glass and use it for another one? I don't think there's much you can do with that."

For some reason, that got me. "What's the matter?" I said. "I don't see anything wrong with it. It just needs a little patching up, that's all."

"Yes," said Jennie, "I think it's going to be the best one yet."

Linda went back to her easel, and we began to work in earnest now: we had to make something out of it. We got out the plaster and began to patch, filling in the air bubbles, using it as glue for the loose pieces of glass. We put the black paint on as soon as we could, because it toned down some of the worst passages and made things look less haphazard.

Linda worked serenely at the other side of the room. We knew that the insides of her head were spinning around faster than they had ever done in all her tormented life; but superficially she was the collected artist at work, applying herself unreservedly to her craft. The trouble was that the results were not up to standard: her painting was little better than our mosaic. I watched her as much as I dared out of the corner of my eye, and she seemed impatient with her work. Whereas she had always looked until she knew exactly where the apple sat and how, she now did not look quite long enough, or hard enough, so that nothing in the picture shaped convincingly. But she threw us a bright remark or a smile now and then, and we answered her as best we could. By eleven o'clock we were seething to be out of the house.

"Are you going to the race so soon?" she asked. "What time does it start?"

"It doesn't start till one," I said, "but it's out at Langhorne, and we'll probably get lost on the way. We don't want to miss any of it."

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know. We may stay out there for dinner. We'll be here in time to take you to the Cage."

"On the motorcycle," said Jennie.

"All right," Linda said. "I'll just work on this and read a little and wait for you."

We ran downstairs and out to the front stoop. "Dig that sunlight!" Jennie shouted. "Smell the air!"

"Jesus," I said, "I don't know how I'm ever going back to that apartment." I smelled the air myself, and it was good. But even the warm day could not obliterate the thought of Linda, and I turned to Jennie beseechingly: "What are we going to do with her?"

"I don't know, Lochinvar. I've tried to think of a lot of things, but nothing's any good. Whatever she does with herself, it'll take time."

"We haven't got time. Soon we'll both be as buggy as she is."

"Don't think about it," said Jennie. "Remember: we're going to a motorcycle race."

The race, called a scrambles by the *cognoscenti*, was in the woods on a piece of property bounded by two railroad lines. There was a very steep little valley with a creek in the bottom, and up and down the hillsides and through the water ran a path no wider than would be necessary for two people to walk narrowly abreast. It was the race course.

When we arrived the races had not yet begun, but many of the competitors were out on the track practicing. There must have been twenty machines of all sizes going around at a variety of speeds: testing the different angles from which corners could

be taken, making up their minds as to which gears could best be used in which stretches. The high scream of two-strokes mingled with the ominous bass of valved engines; and the little valley echoed with their raucous assertions.

Near the starting line were the pits, divided from the spectator parking area by nothing more than customary usage. Here a few riders and their mechanics made last-minute adjustments; and here as on the track throttles were wrung open over and over, filling the air with their cries. Everywhere we went we were surrounded by the glory of unmuffled exhausts in volatile declamation.

The races began with little ceremony. A dozen machines of the smallest class were lined up in three rows behind each other; and when the flag dropped, it was as if someone had dropped a bomb among them. Some reared up on their back wheels, and some from the back row darted like fishes to get through impossible holes between the machines ahead. Only gradually did it appear that there was a plan of action: all the motorcycles were heading in approximately the same direction.

When they reached the first turn, they were still in a tight bunch; and as no one seemed inclined to give way, they went five or six abreast into a path between trees which could not have been meant for more than two cycles at once. How they all got through it is a mystery: I am sure that the funneling action of the turn laminated them to each other for an instant; but once through, they established their individual identities again as they sped downhill toward the stream.

Only the first rider was dry on the far side of the water, because the others, pressing close behind each other, cheerfully ate the muddy spray from the machines ahead. None of their helmet-framed faces revealed the slightest concern: the mud was just part of scrambling, and not the worst part either. As the race went on, the machines became more spread out, but there were always groups of two or three who fought it out through every

turn and up every hill. To the end there was no slackening of the frantic competition.

With each race that followed, the machines were larger and faster. The turns were more horrific, the water splashes more spectacular, and the thrown dirt from the accelerating tires more venomous. At the sides of the course, not more than a few feet from the action, spectators lounged, watching the races with cool detachment. Most of them wore leather clothing, and though they must have fought the wind for many miles to get there, many were fastidiously groomed. Others, more akin to the racing drivers, wore dirty T-shirts and patched leather pants, and had beards which appeared to have been plastered back by wind. They were friendly, and answered politely what few questions Jennie and I dared to ask. One offered us a beer, of which there seemed to be a copious supply in every sidecar and saddle bag. No one smiled, for that would have been a sign of callowness; but everyone, when approached, turned out to be mild and pleasant. Obviously these were people who had refined the art of living beyond Walter Pater's fondest dream.

*

*

*

When the races were over, we wandered back to the parking field where we had left the Jawa. Others were leaving too, and we stopped to watch. Embroidered emblems of clubs and manufacturers flashed from the shoulders and backs of iridescent jackets, as owners jumped up and down on their machines to start them. Jeweled studs on leather boots splintered the sunlight as wicked heels rammed down on pedals. And one by one, the pulsating engines came to life, quieter than those of the racing machines, but deeper and more assured. Then straps were pulled over chins to hold hats down, and gloves were drawn on, their gauntlets reaching halfway to the elbow. Girls, who bulged from their leather clothes, tied down hair and climbed on back of the machines: the slow cavalcade to the exit began.

In a few minutes they were all gone. A hundred gleaming motorcycles must have passed by where we stood, each clearing its throat in its own idiosyncratic way and preparing for the road. A hundred riders must have passed, each with his chin set, his shoulders high, and goggles or sunglasses making a mask of his iron face. The field was deserted, save for a few competitors who horsed their machines onto trailers for the trip home.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't feel like going home."

"Neither do I," said Jennie. "Let's go for a ride."

Our little Jawa, no longer the terror of the road we had once thought it, but now just a nice little machine, started up readily enough. I drove it slowly out the exit and slowly down the road. I don't think in two hours of steady driving the speedometer needle ever went above forty, and usually it was well under that. I suppose we looked at farms; houses and stores, bridges and trees must have gone by. Somewhere along the way we must have stopped to eat a hamburger. But I remember only general sensations without attachment to physical events until the sun was long set, and we found ourselves coming to a neighborhood of houses, and a sign said:

Norristown 3

It was then that we gathered courage to shake off the dream and face the evening ahead.

"Hey," I said, stopping the machine and turning around to face Jennie, "we promised to take Linda to the Cage tonight."

"Yes, we did, didn't we?"

"We'd better tear ass, or we'll be late." We turned toward Crefeld, and I opened the machine up. The speed did the trick: by the time we reached home, we both thought ourselves in the humor we needed to be if we were to get through that evening.

"To the Gelded Cage! We leap!" I shouted, sticking my head in the door.

"I'll just get my coat. I'll be with you in a second," Linda called. In that second, I scuttled to the kitchen on the pretext of

picking up matches, and passed through the living room on the way. One glance was enough to confirm the worst suspicion: Linda's picture was not a stroke farther along than it had been when we left.

The three of us climbed on the motorcycle, I riding on the tank with Jennie behind me on the seat and Linda on the pillion behind her. "Arriba!" Jennie shouted as the machine crawled away under our combined weights. But in the park, along the river drive, it picked up speed and we were able to clip right along. Though the trees had nothing to show us yet, there was a feeling of spring about the night, and the water running from our eyes did not turn cold on our cheeks.

For Jennie and me, it was a problem in concentration: we had to forget that Linda was on behind. Jennie unzipped my fly and put her hand in, and I managed to pretend that I was interested. But contrary to her usual inventiveness, she couldn't think of much to do with the hand once it was in there, and she withdrew it before we had reached town.

We were a dispirited crew, standing on the sidewalk before the coffee house; but Linda made another of her extraordinary efforts. "It's the *Gilded Cage*," said Linda. "See the sign right over the door?"

"It's the *Gilded Cage*," I said. "Just step inside and see the clientele."

It was dark inside, and in the back a victrola was cranking Bach or some other cornball. Beat old tables and chairs had been painted with a gilt which had rubbed off on the frictional edges. And there sat, for the most part, students like ourselves. They were not prepossessing, in spite of their fantastic clothing. In fact, they were a sorry lot, compared to the motorcyclists Jennie and I had seen that afternoon. For these are the damned ones of our age: the ones who think too hard and see too clearly. The motorcyclist feels intensely, and he covers his feelings with a slick surface of affection. But these are genuine only in their superficialities, and they have to affect intense feelings. For

these are the gelded ones: the tried-and-couldn'ts, the you-go-firsters, the when-I-was-youngsters, the better-not-dare-me's, the don't-be-squares, the let-it-happens, the A-bomb-snivelers, the we-ain't-niggers, the who-gives-a-shitsters, the Beat Generation. Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were beaten.

Jennie, who had never been there before, barged in with her trick of waving and calling as if she knew everybody. Naturally, there were several people who either thought they knew her or wished to pretend they had a friend, and we sat down at a table in the center of the room amid general acclaim. "Always sit in the middle in a dump like this," said Jennie. "You might as well be seen. There isn't a goddamn thing for you to see."

She was right: there was an exhibition of photographs around the wall, but judging from their quality, the *artist* must have been a relative of the proprietor. Up at the ceiling, a bird cage of uncertain color provided the motif, and through its bent wires curled the smoke of long-crushed cigarettes. The people played chess, or drank their coffee and talked, so that it was like the cafeteria at school, but more expensive.

"I'll have a Missionary's Downfall," said Linda without looking at the menu. And I had an inkling right then of what the night would be.

"Black coffee for me," said Jennie.

"You mean *espresso*?" asked the waiter condescendingly.

"You can call it whatever the hell you like, but it'd better be coffee when it comes to the table," she said.

"Coffee for me, too," I said.

Jennie took off her shoes and wrapped a leg around mine. With her toes she kept the rhythm of the background music on the arch of my foot. But we drank up in silence, looking around the room for amusements that did not materialize. Though the doors were open, it seemed stuffy in there: the purple walls allowed no illusion of ventilation, and the steaming coffee

machine at the back added its vapors to the already crowded air. Talk from other tables was not quite loud enough to hear, but too loud to ignore; and there was a constant rumor from cars grinding past in the street. Sandaled feet slid across the dirty floor, as grim-faced pastries found their way to sweet teeth.

It was the air that was worst. Were there just too many people breathing in there? Or was it that the smoky ceiling bore our own breaths back to us still laden with our consciousness? I was ready to leave almost before we had sat down.

Jennie drank her coffee in one gulp and got up. "I've got to piss," she said. "Hold the fort."

For several awful minutes Linda and I were to be left alone. The silence in which the three of us had sat without question now seemed intolerable when there were only two, and through my brain ideas for conversations flew like milkweed seeds in a gusty wind. "Seems to me we've been here before," I said, knowing before the words left my mouth that it was the worst possible opening.

"Yes, we have, and not so long ago at that," said Linda. She reached out and took my hand, which lay limp on the table, in her own. That hand of hers, which had so often sent spasms of delight through me when I had contrived to touch it, now closed upon mine. It was the same hand, firm-fleshed as green fruit, so miraculously smooth that it seemed no real hand, but an idealization of what a hand should be. I shuddered involuntarily, and tried to withdraw my own. But Linda held on firmly, and I was too weak to pull hard. Her face wore a kindly smile, which must have mirrored some grotesque leer in my own. "It doesn't change much here, does it?" she said.

"Oh, I don't know. Everything changes all the time." I gesticulated broadly with my free arm. "People imagine that things are the same, but they never are. You can never go back to the way things were before."

"Maybe not," said Linda. But here comes Jennie. Don't let

her keep us out too late. Remember: it's our night tonight."

I looked at her then, hard in the face: she was smiling a smile that was meant to be confidential and kindly, and it almost worked. The mouth was set right, and the head was tilted slightly to one side: just the right posture. The nostrils were full, and the arched brow conformed to what she wished to convey. But it was the eyes that gave her away: those eyes I had never seen before, which she always kept averted in any moment of stress, so that their color and shape were never known, now looked at me full on. And they were dun; they were vacant; they were dead. "Jesus, Linda," I whispered, "I'm not that sophisticated."

She leaned back in her chair and let go of my hand. Jennie sat down, and there followed a moment of conspiratorial quiet. "Well, let's go for a walk then, shall we?" Linda said.

I jumped to my feet. "Sure, that sounds great. Let's go."

"Where are we going?" asked Jennie in surprise.

"Why don't we go down through the center of town?" said Linda. "We can go on down to the Vine Street Bridge. They say you can get quite a view of the city from the middle."

"Who wants a view of the goddamn city?"

"Come on, Jennie. We're going," I said.

I took Jennie on one arm, and Linda took my other. We walked over to Market Street and down, looking in the penny arcades, the pinball emporiums, the automatic art studios where they take three pictures for a quarter. But Market Street grows duller after Tenth or Ninth, and we cut over to Vine, where we could watch the bums come staggering by us with their palms perpetually outstretched and a muttered word to tell us the pity of their condition. In the park at the foot of the bridge they were thick as cigarette wrappers in a gutter, but as soon as we began to climb the structure itself, they thinned out and disappeared, because the uphill work would have been too much for them.

It was nice on the bridge, though as we ascended so did the velocity of the wind, reminding us that summer had not come

yet. But the smells of the city streets were left behind, and we got only a vague emanation of hops from breweries along the river. Lights took on order as we climbed away from them, articulating streets and buildings, instead of glaring meaninglessly. Traffic on the bridge was only fitful, so that the broad eight lanes were often empty; and by the time we reached the crest, it seemed to me that we had arrived at the plane of harmony, where all our problems would be reconciled. Linda, Jennie, and I were three people walking on a bridge. We had no contentions, no aims but to stretch our legs and take the air. Surely we would soon be laughing and joking like ordinary people.

What happened next is difficult to explain. It is not that it happened so fast, for indeed all movements were slow: so slow that I or Jennie could easily have done a hundred things to stop them. But there was a quality of trance to them, as if, occurring as they did at such a height above the city, on such a plane, they became supernatural: like a passion play, a dumb show of grinding inevitability. It was as if the bridge were in clouds which numbed us, and took from us the governance of our acts.

"Will you hold my pocketbook, please?" said Linda.

"Sure," I said. And I thought, she is going to jump off the bridge now.

"Hold my coat too, will you? And my shoes." She took them off carefully and put them in my arm, so that both Jennie and I were laden with them.

Linda simply walked a few paces away from us, put her hands on the rail, and vaulted over. I must have partially come to myself, for I remember saying, "Linda, what are you doing? Linda, don't do that!"

But she was gone. We ran to the rail and leaned over and watched her fall for what seemed a long time. She made no sound that we could hear, but her body splayed out in uncoordinated struggle against the uprushing air, so that she seemed to grow larger as she fell. We did not see her at the end because

the wind took her, like a shred of paper, and blew her out of sight under the bridge. Thus we leaned, paralyzed, until some basic calculation in our stunned minds told us she had hit the water.

I lept out into the road and stopped the next car. "Get a cop," I shouted, "Linda's jumped off the goddamn bridge."

SUNDAY

The cops have come and taken us from the bridge down to a pier by the water's edge. They have put out launches in the river, whose searchlights sweep the surface in a steady progress downstream. They will search continuously, they tell us, until they find the body.

"You'll bring her to this dock as soon as you find her?" I ask.

The cops just look at me and go away, but their opinion makes little difference, for in my mind I do not acknowledge their existence. We are left alone, except for the ambulance and its driver waiting confidently for their burden. Its parking lights are on, and from the driver's compartment comes the faint sound of static, and a desk sergeant telling off dooms elsewhere in the city.

We cannot see the river itself, because there is a warehouse on the end of our pier to block us. By going to the edge, we can see a small, greasy patch of water, about the size of a vegetable garden, between us and the next piled warehouse. What light there is comes from the ambulance, and from the bridge lights grimacing above and upriver from us.

I decide to make an examination of the pier. It is old: it has seen many years of banana crates dropped on its rough boards, so that creosote, its only consolation, will not cover the scars. Its pilings, where they stick up above the decking, are tin capped, and around their waists run grooves cut by ropes which have held fierce boats out of the stream. On their tops, guano has reacted with the galvanized sheathing to form a patina which is unique: it is rough to the touch, and leaves a dry feeling in the palms of the hands.

The warehouse is frame, with wide board siding vertically arranged. There are cracks between most boards, but it is not possible to see in. The boards may have been painted once, but little trace of it remains, and the grains of the wood are drawn up in relief. The doors are of the same construction, and they will roll back on tracks if the padlock is undone. They move a little when I shake them, but like the rest of the building they are surprisingly strong, and they will not yield in any significant way.

I go back to where Jennie sits on the deck, her legs drawn under her. She feels the cold, though it is a mild night in March, and I sit down beside her with the vague idea that my presence will be warming. But as her posture and features do not change, no matter how long I sit, I leave her my coat (she has Linda's beside her, but will not put it on) and continue my examination of the pier.

I find bits of refuse lying here, though none of them has value. A newspaper tells who won the fight; an orange peel has dried in the sun till it is brittle as a skull; a man's foot must once have worn this shoe. I see pieces of metal which have been attached to the decking: rings and bolts and screws. Some have surely had a purpose once, but others serve no purpose now, and obviously never have. But I will count them. There are sixty-three such pieces of metal in all, not counting the ones I cannot see in this half-light; but the ones I cannot see do not signify.

It must be three in the morning and the cop launch is coming



in. We hear it first, churning the water quietly, and like communicants we come to stand at the edge of the greasy water. The boat slides in, a blue light flashing idly from its prow. In the open cockpit astern, a stretcher covered with a sheet rocks slightly with the waves that come from the launch and echo off the pilings of the pier. When lines have made the boat secure, the stretcher is lifted from the deck by two cops and heaved up beside us.

I pull the sheet away from what is underneath. It is the same Linda; the same firm flesh, and the same dun eyes. But the hair, usually bobbed close around her, now falls back from the weight of water in it, so that it forms a halo round her head, like the van der Weyden she was working on not four days ago.

Jennie looks too, and then we pull the sheet back up, covering her completely.

This Night in Sodom

by Charles Jules Reiter

I

Manhattan evensong: Cacaphony of Midnight. Fortysecond Street alive, a blinking moat of headline illumine blazoned from River East to the Hudson. At the intrusion of Broadway, cornered in the crush of a south corner curb, stood the tottering old man, dazed, aching (upper plate burning in his skull), pleading, why? Why? Two-thousand-mile disaster of flight on a Greyhound transcontinental (all that wide expanse). Route march double-time from the haven of what to . . . what? Had fled to observe, to . . . Moaned. A humming sob in his head. Growing. Drowned out that honking train—Chevy, Ford, Plymouth, Buick. Where's the Marmon? What ever became of the Marmon?

Old Tired, put out to pasture too early, herded mercilessly from a Thirtyfourth Street depot to the anarchy of where he stood. Help! Compulsive wail from within that bunched and swelled like proud flesh, and the HELP so livid inside he could feel it unfurl up the lit moat, down the bisecting canal. *Fright*. Stole a look left, right. Undiscovered. When suddenly they—the mob—charged. *Green light*. Charged, roared. *Red light*. Stopped, clotted like old blood. Indecisive Age stood watching in horror; then turned in defeat, humble Vanquished, and tottered back down the cement walk.

It all began to fragmentize in his mind. Before had seemed so tight knit, so neatly dovetailed. Grand Southern Hotel, the man on the Greyhound said. Tartan Weskit filthy with food stain and a blasphemous tongue. Loudmouth too, with a brown stubble growth and stinking of rye whisky. Rode side by side tight as Siamese kin from Chicago to Sodom. Chi, he called it. Unspeakable boor! *The language, the language, what's happening to the language?* That's the place, if you know what I mean, if you got the will 'n 're able, and an elbow in the ribs to mark the exclamation. HAR HAR HAR! HAR HAR HAR! Laughed at his own stale joke, joke about an old man. Laughed and laughed. Should have spat back. Could have said: Do you know to whom you are speaking? No, that would have doubled him up. Could have said: I'm fit. *They* let me go, but I'm fit. Forty years at Lincoln and never missed a lecture. Never a lecture! DO YOU KNOW TO WHOM YOU ARE SPEAKING? *Cha ra ra, will you, will you, can you?* *Cha ra ra, will you, will you, can you?*

Had started as a search as a something two thousand miles ago until Grand Southern had come to seem a means a way to what? Midway down the neon kaleidoscope it stood, huddled between T*H*E*Y* D*I*E*D* W*I*T*H* T*H*E*I*R* B*O*O*T*S* O*N* and F*R*A*N*K*E*N*S*T*E*I*N* A*N*D* D*R*A*C*U*L*A* T*W*O* G*R*E*A*T* C*L*A*S*S*I*C*S*, looking mean and untidy, GR ND SOU HERN HOT flickering lifeless in fixed off-white illumine.

Hunger mewed but he put it off. A weak sister at best these days. Courage flagged near the entrance and he passed on to a Schrafft's where he took a small martini with an onion from a supercilious bartender in a black jacket. BIRTH CONTROL URGED, ZOOLOGIST REVIEWS WAYS TO SLOW "DISASTROUS" POPULATION GROWTH, enlightenment of the *Times* from the bar beside. No comment. Sorry. Not until I've had time to examine the premise more thoroughly. You under-

stand. Drank his gin down slow, with dignity, in the manner proper to the once Purveyor of American History (\$2,500 per annum commencing the day he left, replete with honors and rights, but he could go whistle for the Emeritus, lost past year to Johnson, that puppet), and when he'd finished, wiped his dry lips dry on a Pabst Beer napkin and left a fifteen-cent tip. Then he walked back to the hotel.

Parched mind through pursed lips: "No baggage sir? That will be \$5.50 . . . in advance" the last delivered with a vengeance, as if meant to carry some hidden inference or ominous threat. Does it show so openly? Is it so obvious? Only a month and two thousand miles since I left. DO YOU KNOW TO WHOM YOU ARE SPEAKING?

Nigger porter called Shuffles, Tartan Weskit had said. Runs the elevator nighttimes. He's the one. Rickety car, Gilded Era vintage. All curlicues and painted over brass and open screening. It staggered as it climbed. His knees kept buckling and he pressed himself into a back corner for support. *Years that trembled and reel'd beneath me!* Before him bobbed the black head, tight-knit curls cropped short, and greasy. . . . *old man bending I come among new faces.* . . .

Opened his mouth and rasped a gasp. Tried again and . . . "Whisky?"

"Say somp'n?" Turned and smiled the peddler's smile.

"Can you buy me some liquor?"

Shrugged the narrow shoulders and smiled the smile of the hopeless. "Sorry sir. Whisky stores all closed down now, after midnight."

"I'd be willing to pay. . . ."

Merchant's grin, convivial surrender to the custom of the day. "Keep somp'n 'round for special guests. What's your pleasure?"

"*A woman waits for me.* . . ." Slip of Whitman's tongue. Asinine. Saturnalian. Herr Professor Freud, let this one pass.

"What's 'at?"

Flustered. "Nothing . . . anything will do nicely, thank you. . . ."

Third floor, slow climb, slow, fourth. . . . "I've been told . . . a gentleman met on a bus . . . that you have dealings with . . . ?" and could go no further.

Elevator juggled to a stop and the fellow turned a blank face. Everything sat there: laughter, ridicule, denial, yet it remained empty of expression. White hand foraged into a tweed side-pocket and fumbled a bill into the other's palm, not so much to pay as to still before it came to life the denial the panderer was about to mouth. Pimp pocketed the bill with a shrug and led him down a dreary hallway to an unkempt closet at corridor's end where he passed in to the middle of the room and stood waiting, waiting. . . .

"Only one free t'night's the black gal."

Turned and glared at the guileless face. Disengagement, a national policy. A white man's world and some did like black meat and some didn't, and it had nothing to do with him. He was pimp and porter and it was no concern of his if a dirty old man wanted to buy himself a woman. With a curt nod he assented and the door closed on a black face empty to the last.

Four walls and what? Nothing. Boxed in like a chimpanzee. Walk. Walked to one wall and then back to the other. Walk. Up and down the middle of the room. Movement is life; life is motion. Stop to sit and it's death. Death for the Old with bones so weary they seem to have wills of their own. Move. Shuffled to the window and forced it open with the wavering force he'd come to accept as his strength. Great heavy gust of dust air flushed into the room, twirling the twin mangy drapes about like a couple of empty-headed chorus girls. Outside, eight floors down, wended teeming madness. Communal voice called up to him, wafted on the winds, crying, too distant to be intelligible. What was that? HELP! Them too? Help. Dragged it back down to squelch the prayer.

Sweating. At the armpit, and a rivulet down the back. My God! First time in years. Rejuvenation, resurrection, reclamation of the dead. Hallelujah and three cheers. Pip pip hoorah, pip pip hoorah, pip pip hoorah. Started to shuck his jacket but then remembered the girl. Conflict: as to the propriety of the jacket off when she came. A whore to be sure, but a woman all the same. *For the Colonel's Lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under their skin.*

Lamely walked the midfloor beat again. Up, down, up, down. Up welled the past. Five more years they might have given if they'd wanted, if they'd been so inclined. Myers got it, why not me? Thrust a man out. From my very life, as it were. Cut the ground out from under. Subtracts a man from himself, whatever he was to start. Like the land fed Turner's magnum opus. Pap! Bugged down with Turner. Baby pedant sitting up there on Michigan Lake, spieling a shorn faith. America come American to the good, but no frontier? Tell them their souls fry in hell, but for Christ's sake, don't take away the frontier. Like taking a man's work. Still able. Not doddering *just* yet.

No proper analogy. And yet of late found pastime in bunching diverse concepts and forging common ground for them. Sloppy thinking. Bad. Like that English Literature bunch back at Lincoln. Effete. Sloppy. Something happening to the land, and they go on chanting their Shelley and Keats like a band of deranged Talmudists. Something *is* happening to the land. What? Move. Move. Don't sit. Movement is life; life is motion. Move.

Tap on the door. A hesitant tap. Old bones creaked him a march to turn the knob. She stood there, a plump brown girl about twenty-five, smiling a careless hotel whore's smile. "You wanna see me?"

Soft brown tone, milk chocolate. Not black at all. "Come in my dear, come in." Stooped almost to a bow, welcoming a coed for after-class consultation. Tap tap the hard-tipped heels on

the floor. When he straightened up the pimp was there smiling, bottle in hand, with a bucket of ice and two glasses. Handed him a ten-dollar bill and he went on standing there, the grin even and fixed, like a well-banked fire. Handed him another five and he fingered a mock Uncle Tom salute and closed the door behind him as he left.

"Well now, this is all very cozy," he to the whore, and began bustling about the room preparing a faculty tea. Nerves, he told himself, but it made no difference knowing, he still bustled. LIFE IS MOTION. Got a handtowel from the bathroom and wiped the clean tumblers clean. Then took them into the bathroom and drew some tapwater. On his way back he suddenly forgot what he was doing there. (The mind had taken to playing this trick, dissolving the essence of what, only minutes before, had seemed of infinite importance.) Glanced wildly about the room, caught his eye on the girl, and froze.

Already half out of her clothes, stood there in the middle of the room, plump young breasts bobbling with her exertions.

"WELL NOW, THERE'S NO HURRY, IS THERE?" Too loud. Hadn't meant to shout. Sweat again. Armpits and back. Oh Lord.

She stood looking at him for a moment, uncertain, one long brown leg outside the skirt, the other entangled.

"Sorry," he flustered, "I merely thought . . . I imagined we might spend some time . . ."

She wasted no amenities. "Mistah, I got a livin' t' make." Very brisk and to the point.

Embarrassment. Felt the silly ass. Sat down and drank some water. What sort of fool? Playing the boy's game. Peeped guardedly back at the girl, standing there fullblown brown statuette, growing impatient, tapping her foot, and the barest memory of something—passion? unlikely—flicked within. He fingered the idea of nurturing it, evoking from it whatever there was to call forth. But he was old and bent under the sterile habits of the

passive years, and he merely sat there twisting and turning the empty glass.

"What's it gonna be, mistah?"

Thought and gauged. Gagged at the prospect of a night alone. And beyond that, *there had been a reason!* And beyond that, he was a man for all of it. Looked at her critically for a moment, and then asked in a small voice: "What is your fee for an entire evening?"

Expression grew wary, sly, almost hostile. "Seventy-five dollars." Flung out defiantly, and yet virtually a question, frayed and worn about the edges with her acceptance of NO before it was mouthed. Black girls come cheap.

"Well," sighed with relief, the messy business of money done with, "that doesn't sound unreasonable. Have a drink to seal the bargain, shall we?"

The shutters closed on the brown mask. With a shrug that signified nothing, she stepped out of her skirt and walked naked over to sit down on the bed beside him.

Shot up like a bolt and started pouring liquor into the glasses to cover his embarrassment. Hands trembled. My God my God. Glass to mouth, dry as dust, and drank, and drank. Whisky burned like fire, cheap stuff, tumbled down inside, burning burning. Then turned to the girl and smiled through wet eyes: "Well now this is splendid. Splendid."

A whore to be sure, but not without feelings. Not insensitive. Sat where he'd left her, smoking a cigarette, juggling her glass from one bare knee to the other, growing uneasy as he watched, until she finally blurted: "A'right if I put m' thin's back on?"

The memory—passion? doubtful—showed light again and he toyed with a NO, but propriety rode roughshod over all and he weakly smiled: "But by all means, my dear, by all means." While she dressed with her back to him, he bolted another, and when she turned once again he leisurely poured them each one more.

Long ago had been another, a mother, white and wife. His. His own. His beloved. Hardly. And yet they'd lived, with each other and without a lot of what might have been but they made it for thirty-five years. Dead of cancer of the rectum. Unholy way to go. As if God, in those final months of stink and pus, had reached down to rob her of the little bit of dignity and courage she'd ever been able to lay claim to. Humbled in the *end*. OhmyGod, no pun intended. No pun on that poor blighted rotting soul. No pun, OhmyGod no!

"Well, what shall we talk about my dear?"

II

MORE! MORE! MORE!

Christamighty. Hold it, man, hold it. Holdit! Pullout! Christ-amighty, pullout! I beat man, beat. Tired. So tired I could cry. Pullout! Lemmealone! *Sweatstink. Armpits, cigarette breath, onions on the wings of a belch.* GET OFF ME YOU BASTARD, GETOFF!

COM'ON BLACK MAMMA, YOU DO BETTER'N THAT. MORE MAMMA, MORE MAMMA, . . .

Almost evening when she woke with the light just beginning to show gray at the window panes. Damn dream worse than work. All night on 'n on, under damn Polack sailor wouldn't off 'n out. Just stayed in with that thing of his musta been a mile long, the sonofabitch! She farted and waved the covers about to

clear the air. Four walls 'n me. That's what she told 'em when they asked. Just four walls 'n me. You spend time with many men 'n you see: four walls 'n me. Nothin' else needed.

One, two, three a-lair-y, I spied Missus Sary, sitting on a bumble airy, just like a chocolate fairy.

Shuffles comin' t'day . . . oh, man, that li'l black pimple . . . money to the folks SEND TODAY, rent 'n all . . . six muvvas las' night, slow, slow . . . the one couldn't git it up skinny little fella with glasses he see'd me blacktits 'n he like t' die, hehehe-hahHAHAHAHAHA . . . that time Pap 'n Mamma 'n us kids workin' the ol' Johnson field outsid a Pitcarin there whitetrash come to work th' longside row 'n they took on somp'n awful 'bout niggahs 'n what 'n Pap say pay 'em no mind cuz they pohwhitetrash 'n di'nt say nothin' 'n then rounabout noontime we set to eat 'n I so dogtired I et quick 'n crawl back unner a bush 'n was 'mos snoozin' when a whitehan' cum clap over m' mouf 'n a man wiffa dirty white hat 'n dirty white eyes shush me 'n I shush not cuz he say but cuz always wanted but 'fraid with nextdoor Goober cuz he blab so 'n he took ma pants down 'n put it in me 'n it was the firs' time, SO HELP ME JESUS.

Dirty white light turning gray. White white world. She hugged herself under the covers, cozy as cozy. Wet with nightsweat the sheet underneath.

Shuffles comin' t'day. . . . "My share-day, honey," he say every time 'n laugh t' die, that li'l black pimple. . . .

Up shuffling about the room all abobble, belly haunches, rolling, rolling, updownupdownupdown . . . next door Kate the streetwhore snorin' like sixty ZONKAZONKAZONKAZONKA . . . tough row Kate hoe, all black, ain't no white, tough row she hoe . . . coffee 'n prayerbook on the checkered tabletop every day jus' like the good Pap say . . . *and there was Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary, sitting over against the sepulchre* . . . prayer fo' the soul, a man fo' the hole . . . ugh, sin words, uppity uppity, Pap gimme a whack t' hear. . . .

She boiled some water over one of the burners of the gas stove, stropped the razor, lathered up and began shaving her legs. . . . *Clean whore's a good whore*, Mary Bishop from Memphis yusta say . . . right smart girl that Mary . . . save her money 'n all . . . scup, scup, scup, the razor over the dry brown shank, scup, scup . . . happy day that night what th' man Frank from the hotel lak any other we went to the Embers nightclub 'n drunk scotch whisky lak white 'n listen to that blin' man play piano lak he have eyes 'n a black band oh they eyes bugged 'n they frisky 'n make me the high sign Frank buy me a steak sizzlin' like sixty 'n then we back t' the hotel all high 'n I give 'm a good time he get his moneyworth outa me he say "I like tricks honey" 'n I play 'em he get his moneyworth that night, man with a wart on his ass 'n all he get his moneyworth. . . .

Flick the radio knob and HONEYBUN, HONEYBUN, YOU'RE A BUNDLE OF FUN BECAUSE YOU LOVE ME, HONEYBUN . . . outside the dying sun drapes a tapestry of fire over the skyline until all steel edged in two-tone red and black shadow. Web of black fire escape graced vertical red-limed line up, to horizontal black straight over, to red-tinted chimney, horizontal burnt umber line over, gray washing hung on an invisible radio aerial high, vertical line, horizontal, street break black shadow, vertical, iron grill web, horizontal, washing, chimney, down, street break, golden burst, carhonk, carhonk, carhonk, over. . . .

Checkered tabletop and prayerbook again while honing the nail edges and plucking dead flesh: *O taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man that trusteth in him* . . . flickflack . . . flickflack. Flickflack over the nail and root out the dead flesh, root it out. . . .

BANGBANGBANG at the door, Shuffles come to take his due, "Howdy little lady, howdy." Stinkin' smile, white man's empty and always. Always smile. Wants his due. Li'l man always feel he got somp'n comin' to 'im . . . li'l black pimple.

Thumb jabbed into the crevice of the soft brown cheeks. "Gettin' fat gal. Gotta keep trim ta stay on my team." Talkin' like a white man too . . . pretty soon he gonna be . . . black face of his ain't gonna help. . . . "Com'on gal, le's get crackin', I gotta go, I a workin' man you know. . . ."

Over to the bed and off with the robe, redrose and pinkorchid flowing limp to the floor. On her back and legs spread and watched mindless while the skinny black chest and shanks came loose from the clothes and came and fitted into her and then joggle joggle joggle, COM'ON BLACK MAMMA, YOU DO BETTER'N THAT, MORE MAMMA, MORE MAMMA . . . like a white man, all played out 'n pretendin' black. She took hold and wriggled and he cried out and went limp and then put his sweaty little face with the perspiration glistening in the mustache up to hers to see what was there and she smiled glad and nodded and said "'At was somp'n" and he nodded and lay his head on her breast. Worst'n playin' nigger, playin' glad with Shuffles.

"See if I can't hustle somethin' up for you t'night, mebbe 'bout 'leven o' twelve . . . see you then" 'n he gone. 'N she free. FREE. Free of Georgia, free of Shuffles, free rest o' th' day. Jus' four walls 'n me. Gonna stay in bed 'n listen t' the radio 'n not do nothin' 'n not see nobody jes' lay here. . . .

III

On and on it ran like an unsavory parody without end. Fat black tart vomiting, vomiting in her cups of dirtywhite hat 'n dirtywhite eyes in coontalk slow-sliding from Uptown Harlem to Backwoods Georgia and all: Shuffles' thumbgoose and bedromp, Frank the provider, the cowed fart, pumped out like so much salacious' excrescence. His mind dumb with the drink. Something disgusting pouring over him and yet nothing to do to stem the flow. Helpless. Couldn't remember why he had come. Or what he was doing here. Opened his eyes and saw the slack mouth going, going, pumping, pumping. SOMETHING IS HAPPENING TO THE LAND. On a mission, but what? Came to find . . . came to prove . . . ?

Suddenly started from his chair and bolted as far as the middle of the room where the mind fumbled and forgot again and he stood there, uncertain, not knowing. Then, as abruptly as he'd stood, turned on the girl and bellowed in a rickety old basso, something suddenly remembered from Wisconsin boyhood:

HOG DRIVERS, HOG DRIVERS, HOG DRIVERS WE
AIR,

ACOURTIN' YER DARTER SO SWEET AND FAIR:
AND KIN WE GIT LODGIN' HERE, O HERE—
AND KIN WE GIT LODGIN' HERE?

Laughter unfolded from all the furled roundness of her, wrenched out of the throat soft and then big HAHAAHA-HEEHEE and rippled down the bosom unfolding the legs until she squat on bed's edge almost doubled.

Hurt dignity. Oppressed pride. Downcast heart, burst soul. Drunk. Drunk in a hotel backroom with a raucous whore laughing herself sick at him. Singing drunk. Not his way at all. Tall scotch after faculty meeting with Ancient History Richards, or maybe two, but not his way at all. Foggy foggy dew in the foggy foggy brain. Sat and the fog thickened. Stood, staggered, gained his footing and strode to the window and back. Think on my feet better than on my tail. *CAUSE I'M A TEACHIN' MAN*. Rennsard's pet facultyroom *mot*. Dumped him when they found out about the drinking. And the night in the motel with the little sophomore from Rochester. Quite a stink raised. If they could see me now. . . . Foggy fog. Words his forte and he reached. The lectern loomed and he pronounced in his classroom pontifical: NOW PAY ATTENTION YOUNG LADY, YOU MAY LEARN SOMETHING. YES, EVEN YOU! TAKE A LINE SUCH AS THIS, I PICK AT RANDOM OUT OF THE WEALTH OF AMERICAN HISTORY: "THE CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES MUST EFFECTIVELY CONTROL THE MIGHTY COMMERCIAL FORCES WHICH THEY HAVE THEMSELVES CALLED INTO BEING." SMACKS OF SOCIALISM, DOESN'T IT? ONE OF THESE FELLOWS DOWN AT UNION SQUARE STANDING ON A SOAPBOX AND RANTING IN PIDGIN ENGLISH. NOT AT ALL! THAT WAS ONE OF OUR GREATEST PRESIDENTS, THEODORE ROOSEVELT SPEAKING. HE WAS A REPUBLICAN AND A CONSERVATIVE AND YET HE

UNDERSTOOD THESE THINGS VERY WELL INDEED. TAKE THIS LINE FROM THE SAME SPEECH: "THE TRUE FRIEND OF PROPERTY, THE TRUE CONSERVATIVE, IS HE WHO INSISTS THAT PROPERTY SHALL BE THE SERVANT AND NOT THE MASTER OF THE COMMONWEALTH: WHO INSISTS THAT THE CREATURE OF MAN'S MAKING SHALL BE THE SERVANT AND NOT THE MASTER OF THE MAN WHO MADE IT." DO YOU SEE THE FINE POINT THERE? DO YOU UNDERSTAND . . . ?

Ridiculous. Godawful. . . . The full picture of himself standing there declaiming to the poor ignorant tart flashed before his eyes and he padded back to his chair and limply folded himself into it. "How I run on, eh my dear?"

"Sounded fine." Sat there nervously twisting her glass and staring at him uncertainly.

Kind gentle girl despite what she was. "You'll have to forgive an old man his babbling. Didn't upset you too much, did I my dear?"

"No sir." Unintentional note of respect. Merely came out, popped up atop that flow of noble discourse. Sounded like a preacher or a salesman. Words and words. Suppose t' mean sump'n? Floatin' 'round in that old man's head of his. Words 'n what else? Long, long 'n skinny. Skin 'n bones. Not like Shuffles, but skinny alla same. Lean, *they* call it.

Effusion of warmth swept over him. Her air of awe tapped at the cockles and he felt a rapport, something lost long ago, in a schoolroom long since forgotten, in a day long dead. He beckoned to her to come to him. No gesture of need or urgency; rather a wave of camaraderie, a signal of come let us warm ourselves together. Cold toward the end. Had arisen that air of charity: tolerance, mere acceptance of him. He who had given a life, forty years. Sin of decommission. Jettison the old, bring up the

new. Old guns obsolete before the new pass out the forge gates. Not old! Middle-aged. The mind still held water. CERTAINLY NOT SENILE. The mind still holds water.

She came and sat gingerly on his lap, afraid the thin tired legs might snap under her. She rested her weight against his chest, uncertain, waiting, earthbrown putty to the white man's touch.

Wanted to cup those fine proud breasts, to finger the fat bordering the sunken navel, to pluck at the plump round thighs. He wanted to . . . *cha ra ra, will you, can you? Cha ra ra, will you, will you, can you?* Shuttled the leonine head on its wiry neck over until the nostrils almost pressed against the gentle creases in her neck. Jasmine? Sweet aroma of jasmine. Chemical stink to it, but jasmine all the same. Home in Wisconsin had sprawled a jasmine arbor slung over the front porch. Come spring and early summer the great thick smell of it would rout him from bed, overflowing with ardor and a hunger inexplicable and strange to thirteen. It was only later . . . later when time turned dry and musty . . . jasmine. Sweet stench of jasmine. Like a mechanical man reached one arm up slowly, creak, and pressed the palm to her breast. Springy, like rubber.

Limp, she rested there on his chest without moving, waiting, waiting, incurious yet wondering. Old man? Old man?

"Well now, there's no hurry, is there?" He felt the proper fool and that was all there was to it. Drunk or no, he couldn't play a game he was incapable of playing. Age, that inexorable catalyst, twists its death smirk into all. Turns all into a practical joke. Purpose flags, falters, falls behind; only the comic's slow pantomime remains, with its air of the ludicrous prevailing like some laboratory stink. And yet, . . . never funk'd out! Prided himself on it. Once started, finished. Silly or no. Pointless or no. Pressed on. Thumbed the rubbery breast; trifled with the hem of her skirt; nuzzled his wrinkled phiz in the soft fat of her neck. She

mechanical as he, puppet to his touch, responded, cuddled to his nuzzle, surged the breast up full into his palm, caressed with limp hand the back of his neck.

Sat thus while the minutes passed, automatons caught up in the throes of a passionless fervor, the one answering through habit the prodding pulling probe of the other's empty ardor. With neither definition nor end, with neither need nor desire, they mocked the rites of Dionysus so listlessly that finally the sham itself turned and mocked them in return.

"No need to hurry at all." Spoke without conviction. Yet, to give up . . . unthinkable. Rationalized the whole: it had nothing to do with physical ability *per se*. No, not at all. More a matter of the soul, or the heart, or the brain. That was it! A NAY from the brain and it all went flat. He'd been out of it for so long that there was no bridge by which to find his way back. Too late? Not at all. Merely need to adjust the thinking. Certainly she was a grand-looking girl. Needed a little time. Without being told she got up off his lap and stood there before him waiting, waiting for direction, waiting to be told. Indifferent, incurious, she waited.

Rumpled Age sat and pondered, wondered what came next. More than anything else this moment he wanted to float to sleep to dream to move away from life to rest. Just for a while not to be. Then he looked up and saw her standing there waiting and knew that duty lay elsewhere. "Well now, my dear," he bellowed heartily, and stood, "shall we go out and get ourselves some air? See the town a bit perhaps?"

Light shone bright. *He couldn't*. And she despised and she pitied and she bitched under her breath because it wasn't going to be a night's easy rest on a soft sack, but jabber jabber with a mad old fart from somewhere she didn't know and they were going somewhere she didn't give a damn and she was tired. She wanted to sleep to rest to let go to lose herself from this world of white faces.

He peered around looking for his jacket until he realized he'd never taken it off. Then he took her by the arm and led her to the door. "What does a girl like you . . . what does one do in New York on a night like this?" he asked. For the moment he was feeling rather gay. He thought that maybe it would all work out.

IV

A nuvva sightseein' tour. Christamighty! Sullen angry mind as they waited for the elevator and then rode down behind the silent pinched back of Shuffles, a smile as they left and a shrug of the shoulders for her. White man's smile. The manikin at the desk sniffed as they passed. She toyed a while with the thought of steering him to the money holes, nightlairs, the big circus. But that was out. With Frank it was one thing, but too tough a course for this old bone. Harlem? She dropped that one like a hot potato. They'd swallow him up whole there, and she had seventy-five at stake. Only place left was the Village. Or . . . she made a stab without hope . . . "They's always the movies."

"Come come. New York, my girl. New York, the hub of the universe. Certainly we can do better than that."

So it *was* a nuvva sightseein' tour. Well he'd have t' make do with the Village. "Greenwich Village suit ya?"

"Splendid. Just the place I would have chosen myself." Edna

St. Vincent Millay and that O'Neill fellow, the playwright, and before them, James. The writer, not the scholar.

Tiring again before it even started. Up down. He could feel everything within falter and begin to play in a low atonal key. "Shooda stood in bed," the man on the Greyhound said. Unspeakable boor.

Manhattan halo playing overhead. D*A*R*I*N*G* U*N*-C*U*T* T*H*E* B*E*D* and further up the block A*T* P*O*P*U*L*A*R* P*R*I*C*E*S* F*O*R* T*H*E* F*I*R*S*T* T*I*M*E* T*H*E* T*E*N* C*O*M*-M*A*N*D*M*E*N*T*S*

Walked through a field of man. Sewn man. Perverts, mutes, cops, nuts. Two fat fags, arm in arm with two svelt paramours, sashayed by wiggling behinds like sows sucking in a mud wallow. Old bindlestiff with a pack panhandling in a hurry scurrying before the blue serge marching implacable down the curb. Strange non-uniform faces. Odd. No homogeneity to them. Poles with great round faces and slack pale hair; Italians, black hair all over; Jews, with those noses of theirs and hornrimmed glasses, like Bernstein in Mathematics. Chinamen, Puerto Ricans, Texans with broadbrimmed fedoras and highheeled boots, black-amours wearing fezes pretending to some lost or never possessed heritage. Mutts. Mongrels. Halfbreed, quarterbreed, octoroon, nothing, least of all American.

Center of the whole and the world on a string of bulbs: L*E*G*I*O*N* I*S* L*I*S*T*I*N*G* H*O*L*L*Y*-W*O*O*D* R*E*D*S* S*A*Y*S* I*T* K*N*O*W*S* O*F* F*I*V*E* W*H*O* W*O*R*K* I*N* F*I*L*M* I*N*D*U*S*T*R*Y* N*A*M*E*S* A*R*E* W*I*T*H*-H*E*L*D*

Fear again. Mere magnitude of it all overwhelmed him. Stood there on the curb with the train streaming by before and the mob massed tight and knit behind and he couldn't cross, but merely stood there holding tight to the whore's arm and fright-

ened frightened. All this move push go: zoom gasoline smoke, stink of oil & cooked macadam, and all those incredible faces. Violence in the ether. Felt it. Violence, madness, fear. His own? No communal. United in fear. Gross fear. Elbow jab 'n "move mister, move" and "ya shooda stood in bed" and zoombustle-jostlehustle "move, mister, move."

He froze so long she finally took his arm and hustled him into a taxi stalled for a red light; they crept down Broadway slow, snarled in the eternal train bumper to bumper. Harlem Heights to the Battery. A foreign world! He felt suddenly as if he—who had taught the glorious mystery of the land from the heart for forty years, his life—were in a distant country, a place he'd never known. Right here where it all began! Here, where Washington Greene Gates and the others waged the hero's fight! Here in Genesis, USA, lost amid a foreign race! The girl started to rest herself against his shoulder but he drew himself off into the corner of the seat, a lonely deserted old man who'd suddenly discovered he didn't speak the native tongue.

Through the rearview peeked the eyes of the driver. Curious as a cat: oldwhiteduffer 'n niggerwench. ID placard tacked to the seatback below the chrome ashtray read: Rabinowitz, Nathan. *What is this place? Where am I?* Old Lost curled deeper into the corner, deeper into himself. Bitter pill, my lost land.

She to him: "Ain't you feelin' so good?"

He to her: "I'm quite all right, thank you. Quite all right." Crabbed voice of an old crab with an ulcer. Taking it out on her, poor girl. Not her fault land's been misplaced. *What's happened here?*

Sheridan Square where Christopher and West Fourth and Grove meet to consort with mainstem Seventh. Two Ay Em on a hot summer's New York morning. Thought it was later. Only two hours with her in that closet? Seemed half a lifetime, as if half were spent in that other life and half in that dreary little room.

Loomed suddenly a familiar face out of the shadows. Phil Sheridan in Union blue. Proud drooped mustache; dignity etched in weathered verdigris patina. Doffed the gray fedora and bowed a courtly bow. MORNIN' GIN'RAL, HOW'S THE SHENANDOAH LOOK TO YOU T'DAY? Giggled the girl behind. Laughed himself. Ridiculous. As usual. Old fool. Relic meet relic. Turned and took the plump brown arm and they were comrades once again. The sense of gaiety returned. Odd what comfort a familiar face brings. What's done is done; past is past; lost is lost. Girl giggled again and he laughed outright. Comrades again. Pals to the end.

V

Crazytown 'gain. Down here ev'ybody pass. Ev'ythin' 'n ev'ybody. Kookie place. Me, ah lak it fine. Ol' man what he thinkin' 'bout tellin' it th' place fo' him. Hardly stan' up. Cain't git it up. This ain't no place fo' you ol' man. HELLO THEAH CHOLLIEBROWN. WHAT YAWL DOIN' HEAH? SLUMMIN? HAHHAHAHAHA? AIN'T YOU A CAHD. US TOO. WE SLUMMIN' TOO. SEE YA. . . . Friend o' mine f'om up-town name of Chollie Brown. Ain't he the crazy one. Down heah slummin'! CrazyniggerChollieBrown.

Louie's on West Fourth knuckled 'longside Circle-in-the Square. Packed five at the bar 'n man at the door say no mo' but then some trickle out 'n in we go.

"What'll you have, my dear?" Like whisky but think I'll

drink wine. Make no matter. He edged into the mainstream and tried to work his way toward the bar but got lost in the undertow of young. Beards, mustachios, eczema, Inca pendant, plaited tresses, Eli Y, shortcropped brunette with hornrimmed glasses. IT'S ALL PHYSICAL OF COURSE NO! BUT OF COURSE IT IS. YOU CAN TAKE ALL THE MENTAL THERE IS AND PUT IT ON THE END OF A PIN. I TELL YOU LAUTREC HAD A FLAIR, I WON'T ARGUE THE POINT, BUT WHEN YOU COME DOWN TO IT, WHAT ELSE DID HE HAVE? THE QUESTION IS VERY SILLY BECAUSE WE SHOULD BE WONDERING TONIGHT 'IS THERE A WORLD' YOU'RE SO RIGHT RIGHT, MAN, RIGHT CRAZY ENDSVILLE WHYN'T YA KISS MAX ON THE LIPS? GOWWAN, DO IT HERE NOW IN THE OPEN NO SIN FER A MAN TO KISS A MAN

Bedlam! She'd led him into bedlam! Tightened all up and wanted to run but no channel of escape, surrounded, boxed in hip and thigh, hip and thigh. "Whisky here please," he called to the bartender. All seemed fragments of a whole; all the madness congealing into one diffused unity. Tossed down the drink without thinking and called for another but the bartender already passed on to the other end. Possible that confusion met uptown finds ideology here? Philosophy of formless; concept of disunity; gospel of chaos? Ridiculous! *What have they done to my land?*

Chollie Brown, you followin' me?

Why not? What you doin' with that white daddy?

Sugar Daddy.

Awwww.

Yessuh. Workin' t'night, boy.

HAWHAWHAWHAWHAWHAW. He ain't no work fo' big husky gal like you. You break 'is back fo' 'im.

'S alright. Gal gotta make a dollah too, Chollie. . . . Don't see you roun' no mo'. Whea you keepin'?

Writin' poetry, gal.

Poetry?

Thas right.

Whatevah happen to you job down the docks?

I still workin' thea. Writin' poems nighttime. Right now got me one runnin' through my noodle like a song. . . .

Oooo you crazy Chollie Brown.

Nosuh! Nosuh ah ain't. No mo' ah ain't. Whole gang of us we writin' now. We got a book 'n all.

What you mean, book?

Jes what ah say. We got this fellah name of Joe Barnes what's got money 'n he put out this magazine call *Nighttime Song*. He publish all of us. You talkin' to a published poet, gal.

My, my. Ain't you somp'n tho.

You wanna li'l somp'n?

Nø, Chollie, ah workin' t'night, honest.

Got a l'l pahty goin' up Bleecker street. Marion Parker's place. You com'on up a while, I see you thea. The whole gang singin' 'n bongos 'n all. . . .

This man 'n me. . . .

Bring 'm 'long. Ain't no Jim Crow up the pahty. Whites allowed.

Oh, you crazy, Chollie.

Seeya.

Seeya.

Madness. Abandoned sanity; relaxed the grip and just let go. Mental calamity disjointed disjointed disjointed. What happened to the continuity? Where did it break off? Where did all this come from? TO ME THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN LIFE IS SEXUAL ECSTASY, IT REALLY IS IT'S NOT GOING TO BE A BROTHEL, ITS GOING TO BE A COFFEE HOUSE WHEN I

POSED FOR THAT PICTURE THEY TOOK ME TO SOME OTHER PAD. MY PLACE WAS TOO NICE BECAUSE THE MORAL TENDENCY OF AMERICA IS TO KICK PEOPLE WHEN THEY'RE DOWN 'N HURTIN' I MEAN THE WHOLE SUCCESS KICK IN AMERICA IS ANTIHUMANE AND IT CAN'T SURVIVE CAUSE IT'S AGAINST THE WORD OF GOD DIG YOU DAD? BUT ZEN YA SEE, ZEN IT'S A SORT OF

He backed off so quick he stepped hard on somebody's foot. ZOWIE, POPS, WHATCH IT. "Beg your pardon, terribly sorry." Physically he began to feel a reaction, not revulsion but a sort of drawing in unto himself, as if that which clamored without weren't real, was a nightmare, and if he withdrew it might disappear. Crowded, stifled, couldn't catch his breath. Felt faint. SOMETHING THE MATTER, DAD? "No, no. Nothing. A little air perhaps. . . ." Tank jacket grasped him firmly by the arm and shepherded him to the door. ALL RIGHT NOW? "Yes, of course. Thank you, you've been most kind."

Outside and in the air fumbled up the three stone steps and onto the sidewalk where he leaned heavy against the metal guardrail and almost retched. *No, not physical but mental.* YOU CAN TAKE ALL THE MENTAL THERE IS AND PUT IT ON THE END OF A PIN. MyGod MyGod MyGod. The top plate joggled. Shouldn't. Tight fit, dentist told. Nerves. Mental, not physical. MyGod. Pressed the falsefront back up into the head with two raised thumbs and then looked see who saw. No one. Good.

Nerves going, going . . . felt his heart, beating like a motor rotor out of control, fasterfasterfasterfaster . . . thought he was having a heartattack . . . *for a moment's peace, Thoreau*, axiom of Babs Marston, dean of women. Thoreau, Thoreau, recite first lines: *When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone in the woods, a mile from any neighborhood, in a house which*

I built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life once again. Beneath the hand the heart slowed a bit; slowed a bit. Walden take me back. Why did you thrust me out? I'm still able. Sixty but still able. Good years in me yet. Don't for God's sakes leave me to the mercilessness of this madness. *At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.* No! No! This is insanity. Not even true insanity, but plagiarism, a mockery of itself.

"Whea you been? I been lookin' an lookin' and din't fine you nowheres. Thot you run out'n me o' somp'n."

By the grace of Magdalene sweet black Sheba my own come sweat these lean shanks clean just this one final carnality ad memoriam forty years in the desert of pedagogy a listless farce at best LABOR OMNIA VINCIT & FIAT LUX intermarried and ashes to ashes, dust to dust. . . .

"How you feelin'?"

"Alright, my dear. A little tired, perhaps, but fit. Fit as any."

"Wanna see how these cats live down here?"

"What's that?"

"Wanna go t' a pahty?"

Tired as death. Hand to the bloodbeat in the chest and fast-slowfastslowfastslow. Thoreau conquers all. Requiescat in Pace; ora pro nobis. "Why yes, perhaps that would be nice. For a while, at least. Drop in and pay our respects, shall we say. Yes, that might be nice. Greet the dawn with open arms, that sort of thing." *We were very tired, we were very merry, we had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.* "Yes, Edna St. Vincent Millay and that O'Neill fellow, that sort of thing."

VI

I comin' Chollie Brown. I comin'. I comin' see you brown man. Comin' see you nigger fool. You certain'y somp'n. Poet! Hmmmph. Hehehehehooie. You ain't no poet but you somp'n Ches' big 'nough to drown in, thas you Chollie Brown. Lgs on. you like a football sta', thas you. You man Chollie. Poet! Hmmmph. Hehehehehooie. 'Member you romp me b'foah? I don' fo'git that time, gin 'n all. Gal don' fo'git man like you. You think 'cause o this business I in 'n all I don' feel nothin', don' wan' nothin'? You crazy man. Tain't th' same one way o' t'other. Otherones so many li'l fingers jabbin' me in th' funhole. But you a man Chollie Brown. I comin' to you, I comin' double quick. Poet! Hehehehehehooie.

Down West Fourth to Sixth and then down Sixth a block to Bleecker and then down Bleecker half a block, just before you come to MacDougal. Right there in the tenement front, a doorway between the coffee shop and the pizzeria. Down the street the opera house, Amato's place.

Rickety stairs, two parts dust, three parts rotting maple. Up a flight and then round the landing; up another, and then round the landing; up another, and the heart again, thumpfast, thump-

fast. Put his hand in and pressed back the pain and waited there a minute, resting his head on his chest while he stood. At the top of the flight she turned and saw and asked with indifference guised as jest: "You gonna make it to the top?"

"Of course. Never fear," and crept on up on pure dint of will. *Play the man, Master Ridgley.*

WITH A SILK UMBRELLA AND THE HANDLE OF A BROOM, BOOMLAY, BOOMLAY, BOOMLAY, BOOM. Chaos! First Bedlam and now this. Sworls of smoke hung in the air like great gray dollops of honey. Talk hurled from wall to wall, and then back again. LOUD!! NOISE!! LOUD!! And in the back, the bongo, and a guitar, but loudest the bongo, thumping, thumping, on, on, BOOMLAY BOOM.

". . . an' this here's Mr. Higginbottom." *Nom de guerre, compliments of Mr. Shaw*, thank you my Liza. "Mr. Higginbottom, this Marion Parker. She throwin' this pahty."

"How do you do Miss Parker. My pleasure, I'm sure."

"Glad to have ya aboard. Drop it anywhere 'n grab a drink while its still flowin'." Latter-day Texas Guinan. Skinny scrawny sparrow-chested with long pink angora sweater, levis and bedroom slippers, and a ribbon in her hair. Oh MyGod oh . . . jostled up from the door and to the edge of the hooch table. Bottle of bourbon: empty. Bottle of scotch (pint): empty. Three gallon jugs of Chianti wine, fullup. Poured a glassful and drank. Thirst still distended, drank it down, and poured another. Hot in here. Hot as Hades. "Rather warm tonight, wouldn't you say?" Casual stare and "mmmhmp." Cold Chianti. Very good. Delicious. Delicious. Thirstily sip sip down and another. And the colors in the kaleidoscope of his mind shifted and he thought: how mellow it all becomes. How pleasant. Discord becomes harmony; chaos turns to sensibility. All in a glass of red. My mistake: two glasses. Wrong again: three. . . .

Plunk, plunk, the jongleur with the guitar. Plunk, plunk, and then singing softly, under the shadow of the bongo:

*When springtime does come,
Oh, won't we have fun!
WE'll all throw up our jobs,
and we'll go on the bum.
Hallelujah, I'm a bum
Hallelujah, bum again,
Hallelujah, give us a handout
To revive us again.*

Picking his way through the crowd on the floor, he walked over to the singer and bending low, took his spectacle case and banged it against his tumbler of wine, by way of applause. The boy looked up and smiled happily, drunkenly.

ENJOYED YOUR PLAYING, he shouted down to the boy.
GLAD YOU DID. . . .

HAVEN'T HEARD THAT ONE SINCE THE ROOSEVELT DAYS. . . .

KNOW HUNDREDS OF 'EM. . . .

PLEASE GO ON AND PLAY, I'M ENJOYING IT.

Ambled over to a fat stuffed leather chair settled against the wall next to the fireplace, and sat. Felt rather good. Younger than years. Two parts the wine; two parts life. University toward the end had been a sort of seclusion, a sort of premature eclipse. Why die before you die? Here was vitality, movement, bravado. dash. All sick to be sure, but it kept going like a watch keeping bad time.

Now whea tha' crazy Chollie gone to? Where he at? . . . thea he ovah in the co'nah talkin' that peroxide blonde bitch. Com'on Chollie boy, don' was'e you time on that nothin'. . . . Com'on boy, circulate . . . that other time up t' the pahty t' yo' place

member how you me nuzzled the gin bottle aftah the othahs gone n' the lights low n' the mooney music on the record player n' you strip me down so nice lahk a gentleman . . . ah like you right then Chollie. You treat me foah squah. 'N I like you even bettah lata . . . you somp'n, boy. Com'on, man, scat that bitch. You b'long t' me!

Fourth glass and smooth and calm, the heartbeat down, resting in the big chair near the dead fireplace, listening to the boy strum the guitar. The bongo persisted and prevailed, but he'd grown to accept. The crowd moved back, up, and forth; forth, down, and back, like ocean waves converging on a beach. Hodgepodge again, same as Time Square. Not the same. More affluent. More elite. Elite of the hodgepodge, that is. Hook-nose's brother's here, and a Pole over there with those cheekbones, and a couple of Italians. And all these blacks. Melting pot indeed. Posturing rabble; gray-flannel bohemians. *What's happening to the land's blood?* Not fair, of course. Not at all. Stood, creaked to the Chianti jug, poured, sipped, turned and returned. Not fair. What had the first ones been when they came but rabble, hodgepodge. ANGLO-SAXON HODGEPODGE. To be sure, but it had a lesser connotation in those days. Carried just as little weight then as these do today. Mark my words I'm a scholar and I know. But rational as the mind worked, he couldn't make the heart concur, and finally found himself sneering in exasperation: but honestly, can you imagine them in the firing line at Shiloh? Chapultepec? San Juan Hill? Could I imagine it? And he knew that in the light of truth he should but in his soul of chauvinistic souls, he couldn't.

Come to Mamma, Pappa. Com'on Chollie, I see you ovah thea rubbin' up 'gainst that white. Look how skinny she is, man. No titsatall. 'Ats all paddin', rubber stuff. I got mo' foah you Chollie. Said so yourself, big gal, 'member? Come to Momma, Pappa. I burnin' foah you kin hardly stan' it. It burnin' fo you Chollie honey. It burnin' somp'n awful.

Thinness out of diminution. Of purpose. Of destiny? Had

come or appeared there toward the end of those last wane years in the children—marching now in phalanx through his head—a something trifling nothing he could put his index on while yet just that—trifling—as if as if this veil of tears this fright—life—were no longer worth the strain were no longer worth. Triflers. Non-disturbers. Mid the chaos of Sodom, mid the suckling sound of Sodom's brood at night feeding, he reflected through a drunkard's tears on those he'd so many proud nights laughed and cried My Own! Triflers? Non-disturbers? It had all been very disturbing. And he? Had he to them been more? Less? Cause, it stared him in the face and he blanched. Cause me no ache today you think of pain. Glared about for diversion. Triflers?

CHARLES RUFUS BROWN, poet, pressed against the Jewess Hannah Blomberg nee Schwartz, his knee locked into the hollow between her legs, four palms sweated and interlaced, and recited for her the cult's salacious postiches one by one: GET WITH GOD, MAN, BUDDHA, ZEN, THROUGH THE SACK, THE GOLDEN RACK, GOD'S OWN RHYTHM, BEAT IT IN, BEAT IT IN, BEATITIN, BEAT-ITIN AGIN—FEELIT, FEELIT, FEELIT, TIGHT? GET IT, GET IT, GET IT RIGHT? GODHOLE—ZOWIE, GOD ALRIGHT. And the classic handed down from on high, one of the masters: I'VE SEEN THE GREATEST BROADS IN MY TIME, EATEN ALIVE BY THE U.S. BLIGHT, CONSUMED BY THE AMERICAN DREAD, HAMS LOCKED TIGHT AGAINST LIFE, THE GREATEST BROADS OF MY TIME—VIRGINS OF THE MIND. Throughout, the omniverous knee rocked slow 'n gentle to the beat of the word and Hannah Blomberg nee Schwartz waxed hot 'n hotter, got with it and rocked to the knee, with the knee, on the knee, and moved in close and held, congealed, near dead with want until CHARLES RUFUS BROWN, poet, took her by the waist and led her gently to a backroom where she succumbed with a shriek to the staff of her brown Messiah.

AAAARRRREEEGODOGODOGODOGODOOOOOOOO-
 EEE . . . sat with a start in the chair and twisted, turned,
 SOMEBODY'S BEING MURDERED WHAT'S THAT
 SCREAM? Nothing changed. Smoke still hung dolorous in the
 air, TALK. TALK. NOISE. Still wall to wall and back again.
 And back of all, the bongo, BOOMLAY, BOOMLAY, BOOM.
 And the troubador melancholy drunk in the corner strummed
 and sang:

*All people that on earth do dwell,
 Sing to the lord with cheerful voice;
 Him serve with fear, his praise forthtell;
 Come ye before him and rejoice.*

VII

Fickle fate flung fodder here. Dried old wizen huddled in his
 chair unraveling the thousand threads that led him. What purpose?
 Design don't deign to raise your shamhead here. Let it stand as chance.
 Misbegotten, with its afterbirth clots clinging, and flung into the river
 just as soon as I can, and forgotten. Three decades and ten years ago
 this sinner ventured forth to give light. When was the plug plucked?
 When was the switch pulled? America dispensed in sunny platitudes.
 Breastfed. America, America, America, and it dissolves before my eyes;
 no,

passed into solution before, even as I mouthed it otherwise. I COME TO SPEAK TO YOU IN DEFENSE OF A CAUSE AS HOLY AS THE CAUSE OF LIBERTY—THE CAUSE OF HUMANITY. *Change is the link missed.* All important change. Shifting winds, eddying currents. Checks and Balances meant to counterweigh, but man's hand light as tissue paper. A LAND OF LAW AND ORDER. And yet we fall back. MONEY, NAME, POSITION, POWER, all unaccounted for and assumed alive. That which we assumed better left behind in the fatherland, brought along and nurtured. In secret? No, in the open, flagrantly. YOU SHALL NOT CRUCIFY MANKIND UPON A CROSS OF GOLD. MyGodinHeavenwhatarewe? WHAT ARE WE BECOME?

Quite drunk. And melancholy. Melancholy as the boy at the guitar. With ballad's end, up and clack on the tumbler with the spectacle case. And then to the jug and the cool wine. The foreign wine. So hot here. So very hot. Sweating regularly. Hallelujah, Rejuvenation, Pipiphooray.

Across the room, sunk in a smokepall, rested another, imbibing too, glass of red held balanced on his withers, head sunk to breast, jerked up, peered around, and then slipped back down once again.

That face, from somewhere, sometime, perhaps the slant of the forehead, set of the pursed lips. Uncross the legs and creak up and slow across the room, picking a staggered way through the scattered copses to arrive at the other's side, weaving, weaving, drunk and melancholy. Worn face, that other, haggard and lined, suddenly peered up with redrimmed myopic eyes.

"Pardon me. For a moment there I thought we'd met somewhere. . . ." Voice trailed off into oblivion. Yet the feeling persisted; somewhere sometime. . . .

"Yes?"

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

"You don't remember?"

"Why, no . . . for a moment there . . . but, no . . ."

"I suppose not. It's been so long."

"What's that?"

"Since we walked the same way?"

"But I can't place the face!"

Took a pocketmirror from his jacket (the myopic other) and peered long and sullenly. *Hold it up sternly—see this it sends back (who is it? is it you?). Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth. . . .* "No, not this puss I suppose. Never was a beauty. Years take everything, don't they?"

Something about the Northcountry turn of speech, something about the lips twisted ironically when he spoke. "Did I know you back home?" *What was your name in the States. Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates.*

"Home?"

"Wisconsin. Eldorado, Wisconsin."

"Eldorado, Wisconsin. What names we give our towns, huh? Seems now I recall an Eldorado. All so long ago. A jasmine arbor slung over the front porch and night times . . ."

"Yes, yes?"

". . . nighttimes it grew very dark in the winter."

"Yes, yes, of course it did. But in the summer, just as the sun slid down over the lakewater . . .?"

"You tell me."

"The jasmine, man, the jasmine. You could smell it so rich your heart near burst for the wonder of it."

"You remember, do you?"

"Remember? Of course I do. Like I know myself."

"And you don't remember me?"

"No . . . no . . . can't say that I . . . you aren't one of the Mulvaney boys, are you? Ike? Joel?" *Did you murder your wife? Did you run for your life? What was your name in the States?*

"Nope. Guess again."

Nerves frazzled. Fool's game. "Oh, stop all this cryptical eye-

wash. What are you playing at, William Blake?" *What was your name in the States?*

Stared up at him a while through rheumy eyes, sunk deep into gray lined sacks, and then rolled his head from side to side, slow and then fast, a hollow flattone voice mumbled: *I'm the parts you left undone, the parts you never finished.*

WHAT'S THAT?

Unfinished. Left behind. All that you forsook. In you in you and jettisoned because it didn't fit. Northcountry twist of tongue, roots that grow and madness too, faith lies in and not outside, disremember what you won't, cut and slash the ties that bind, why did you leave me, half dead hulk behind? You need too, just like me. OBSIT OMEN.

"Hey there! Heythere!" Down on his knees and jostling to wake him. What's wrong with you? What are you saying? Heythere! Heythere!" Dead asleep, tumbler to the floor from his lifeless old fingers.

"HOHO LOOKA THIS! Old Joe Barnes 's gone again." From the other side of the room in choral refrain: "WHOSE TURN THIS TIME SEE 'M HOME, WHOSE TURN? Laughter rippled and picked up at the edges of the room and then took hold and filled, drowned out the bongo. HOHO . . . HEEHEEHHEE . . . HAHAAHA . . . "your turn" . . . "no, yours" . . . "no, I went last time."

Up and brushed his trousers off at the kneejoints and forged a wobbly path back to the stuffed chair. Old sot! Mumbling nothing, mouthing, mouthing. Should be ashamed. His age and sitting here drinking with the babies. Should be ashamed. Scare a man to death. To death. Back in the chair and sitting, heart-beat, boom and boom faster and sweat all over. MYGODO-MYGODOMYGOD! Frighten a man to death. The parts I left undone indeed. Must get out of this animal's lair. Sit and relax and calm myself and then must get out. Where's the girl? Where did she get to? Hand inside the jacket and quell the qualm, press, press. Sit and rest a while and then must be off. Must

escape. Perhaps a glass to quiet the pump, and then must go. **MUST GO!**

The young guitarist lay out on the floor as dead, his instrument to one side, an empty glass of red to the other, and moaned like a banshee Stackalee's song:

The jury heard the witnesses and they didn't say no more; they crowded into the jury room, and the messenger closed the door.

VIII

Feelin' giddy. Wanna git drunk or sump'n, show that Chollie-niggerBrown. Whohe say com'on up gal 'n then he go lay that white bitch. Ain't nothin' to 'er. What you see in 'er Chollie, honey? Ain't nothin' theah. You lookit me, boy, you see 'n it all yours. All you need do is ask. You know 'at. 'N you throw me over fo' that piece o' lean bone. You a fool, Chollie. A rotten muvva fool. You think 'cause it white it cleaner? You think it smell nicer? You think it taste better? Ain't so, Chollie. 'S all meat. All a same. On'y I got mo' for you Chollie. Ah got it inside fo' you. Ah so full of it fo' you ah bustin' inside. Com'on feel it, Chollie honey. All fo' you. No one else. That ol' man, he take a bite o' somp'n that rich he die. Jes' like you say, ah break his back fo' 'im. Oh honey, why you do this t' me? I on'y a woman, Chollie. On'y a woman. 'N you treat me so bad, like dirt. Jes 'cause I black? Cause I a whore? I the same color 's

you. I sleep black 'n white. Ain't no Jim Crow in my heart. Why you this way then? They drop you li'l crumb o' white bread 'n you gobble it up so quick like you ain't et in a week. White boy he wouldn't touch that skinny wrinkle thing with a ten-foot pole. But you all ovah her, with yo' poems 'n all, like she somp'n special. Ain't fair, Chollie. Ain't right. Ah bettah fo' you Chollie. I got it inside fo' you. . . .

The bongo and the wine and the haze in the room, and the wrath and the tears and the burning in the place, and the bongo and the wrath and ignited on the wine, lit to heat, to bubble boil, rub it on the window sill.

Moving to the beat, moving, moving, and rubbing, undulating up, away, and slow around and grind, and bongo up and grind and bump and back the shoulders, thrust the breasts, zipper down, squirm around, brassiere snap, clawing paws, spangled panties twist shook off, and kicked to the winds of: GOGOGOGOGOGO . . . YEA, DO IT GAL, DO IT . . . MOVE IT, SHAKE IT . . . GOGOGOGOGOGOGO . . . CRAZY . . . and then from behind, from outside the room, another wind: AAAAAAARRRREEEGODOGODOGODO-OOOEEEE, and faster faster, "Din' hear a thin'," nothing nothing nothing, only stomp out the fire, updownupdown, everythingarolling and rolling and rolling fasterfasterfaster, down on the floor and toss it to the ceiling, toss it to the ceiling, toss it to the ceiling, and CHRISTAMIGHTY CHOLLIE PLEASE DON' LEAVE ME LIKE THIS. . . .

And suddenly it was over and she was flat on her stomach, a pile of limp soggy brown flesh, sobbing, crying her pain out to the walls and the silence; the bongo stilled; the raucous cheers eclipsed. Only she, all buttered roundness lay there pressing herself into the boards of the floor. Embarrassment turned a blanched face: sounded a snicker here, shed a girl's tear there.

First the one in the pink angora sweater and then another and then a third to her side with soft women's palms of com-

passion, "Now, honey, it's all right. I understand" . . . "Yes, (the choral refrain) we understand." And took her by the arm and stood her up and crowded around to shield her shame and she tried to explain: "No, aint this 'tal, 's t' other." But they cooed and clucked and dressed her all the while muttering consolingly: "We understand . . . nothing to be ashamed of . . . it was natural as could be . . . really, it was beautiful."

Sat through the entire exhibition in the big stuffed chair, sipping his wine and watching without so much as a change in expression or an "I'll be damned" to mark the place where it struck him. Rationale cited for the phenomenal calm: so much had passed into his ken since arrival that this macabre denouement barely qualified. All the same, he cherished a certain delicious surprise at the attitude; marveled at his own sense of balance, his hitherto unrealized ability to slog through so much that was inexplicable, right here in his own bailiwick, so to speak, without letting it unhinge him.

His calm had its own reasons, his interpretation notwithstanding. For fear had come and spent the past hours with him. The heart again, a thin slice of pain along the chestwall like incessant static. Ancient, and he feared the heart like cancer. That unknown quantity: sudden stop without warning. Horrible. Horrible. Pressed his hand to it and it quieted, but the next second it returned. Not Godawful, but a throb, a steady throb that sometimes forgot itself and gave more hurt than it seemed it had intended.

Fear and the other, the ally, defeat, entered into it. Or rather, as it pertained to him, acceptance of defeat. Defeat at the hands of an unknown conqueror. No idea of terms—surrender unconditional. Wasn't so bad, considering. Considering that he'd been entrenched and defending an equally indefinable position for the past forty years. Complete turnabout, of course. Another time he might have pointed to self and cried Turncoat! Only this wasn't yesterday but today, and his move was plain common

sense, acceptance of the obvious and inevitable. He'd seen it all. He knew! Trip on the Greyhound across the vast land, and this night here in Sodom. He'd seen it and he knew: it was no longer what it had been. It was no longer what he'd so long preached in the desert. It had all shifted and he had somewhere gotten lost in the shuffle. *Not me the tragedy oh ye gates, but all—a whole nation, lost and wandering the desert sands, singly and alone, disbursed from the lifewaters. Forever? Oh ye gates, why? WHY?* And now that he knew, he accepted, a sort of Lee at Appomattox. *No, bad analogy again. Sloppy thinking. A fool, Lee, spending all those boys without end until Sheridan boxed him in so he had to give; had no alternative. But no thought behind it; a sort of midwife in the saddle, with a talent for his work. All of them, all the heroes Lees when you come down to it. All midwives.*

Relaxed in surrender, like an old trooper done with his wars. Felt as if he'd stripped an awful load off his shoulders. Felt like some religious mystic finally submitting to the arms of his Messiah. Every once in a while he suffered a pang of remorse, akin to the blip alongside his heart, because he no longer knew; because he stood so completely ignorant of that which he'd spent a lifetime prattling about. But then he would assert the terms of surrender once again: that it was not what he had thought it had been, but what it had come to be; that he had no rights to it; that he hadn't had any rights to it for a long time. Then he would relax again, a tired old man worried about his heart and empty, empty, empty.

Across the room the women cluttered about his black tart, still clucking sounds of sympathy and dressing her as best they could, while she rolled under the sobs of her pain. He watched with unseeing eyes, oblivious to all but his own inner void. Finally, for no reason other than that he was tired of sitting, he stood and made his way to the door through the copses of young. *A world I never envisioned; I who was born to know.* One glance back confirmed all he'd met here; he shook his head, adjusted

his hat, and started to make his way down the rickety stairway.

Dark as a trip through hell. One lone naked bulb on the second landing and nothing on the ground floor except the stink of the garbage cans lined up under the stairs. Outside it was almost dawn. No light yet, but off to the east a strip of gray appeared an harbinger of the coming.

Suddenly the fool's energy that had kept him moving through the night of revelations left him and he leaned against the door-jamb trembling in every limb. Hand to the heart again afraid afraid. It's come! Has it . . . ?

He stood there for a while, until the trembling ceased; then he walked the four or five steps to the curb and sat himself down alongside a streetlight. OHMYGOD. Tired, and the static in his chest. He prayed for a taxi but the next minute forgot what it was he'd asked and merely importuned for a cessation of the ache. After a moment he found that when he sat immobile, without thinking, it subsided a bit.

RUNNIN' OUT ON ME O' SOMP'N? From behind, a rasping ire of betrayal.

Runnin' out on me o' somp'n? Indeed. Voice of the upheaval. Speak English, child! How dare you shift the image! No. My error. Speak American. Whatever it happens to be. Pardon. Slip of the pedant. Twisted in the pain of his pingping twinge and smiled wryly: "Stuffy up there my dear. Merely taking a breath of air."

She came and sat the plump bottom on the sidewalk beside him. In silence, with the dull of the incandescent slanting its slats of flat yellow before them, they sat each huddling his own suffering to his breast.

"You see me up theah?"

He nodded numbly. The heart was being quite unkind. Rip. Tear. Quite unkind.

"Crazy 'ats me. Foah walls an' me. Ain' no othah way. Ah certan'y play the fool, doan' ah? Ain' ah somp'n?" And a bubble loosed in her throat and then another.

Squeamish. He thought: this too? O Lord! Need I suffer your world down to the very gray gristle of the splattered soul? My obligation to consume it entrails and all this implacable black stone of a night? And he whined a bit to himself: I'm old. And tired. Too old. Too tired.

Given enough rope. Had this oblivion offered up with his own hands his frayed awareness, a thing most hard for the pedagogue to do. And the schism, that break in his will to close his eyes, had been breached wide and they were sowing the salts of the real into every raw cranny of him, into every hidden crevice.

No, not they. He. Himself, by his own hand.

"Ah tell you somp'n, mistah," she said, swallowing the bitter cud of her affliction, "that Cholliebrown, he poisinin' hisself on that whitemeat, ah tell you 'at raht heah. He sick, man, sick."

And they will mate and bear variants yet more macabre, yet more strange in the face of that heroic origin, that atrophied image buried in me lo these many.

"A changing land," he murmured flatly, and felt on the second it was spoken he'd come full cycle. Mouthing. Mouthing. Words! As if they bore any kinship to what passes. As if they strike any chord, weigh in the balance of anything. A babbler is a babbler is a pedagogical old fool.

"Some thin's, they nevah change," she told him darkly. And then added, as if for further emphasis, "an' they ain't nevah gonna change neithah, nossuh."

Light. So light in the head he could have floated off and away, up into the stratosphere, into the ether beyond the holdings of man, beyond, beyond. Quick, fly up, before that final sanctum too falls under his sway. Quick!

Taking his courage in his hands—those Judas hands—he worked his way up the streetlamp to finally stand on trembling pins and take a breath of the dregs of the night. Chill. Pingping. Without a word he tapped her on the shoulder and she, acquiescent as a manikin, rose and took him by the arm and they strolled slow off toward the asphalt heart of the city. The gray

was taking on the rose of dawn about Sodom's geometric skyline. *We were very tired, we were very merry, we had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.*

IX

Dawn on Times Square. Sands of the day run completely out. A face turned to him so different from that midnight smirk he'd been so frightened by. He glanced to the girl, drooped at his side like some perennial just past its bloom, and wondered what to do. He could let her go, there on the curb, right there with the mob thinning out and the eternal train still passing on, the GO of green gone the color of late grass in the morning light. And it would have ended there as it had started, fear poised on the rim of the gorge, man's daily calamity fresh quit of its circumambulations on the tier of lights overhead, and he once more an atom in the infinite and growing mob.

Only it doesn't end there. It never does. The statisticians raw count table accounts for virtually nothing. Least of all, man. With man it ends in twos and twos, face to face, hip and thigh, breast to breast, man to woman. The only way it is possible for it to end. And so he took her by the arm and said: "Come my dear, you'll rest a bit and feel better." And the two of them, both tired to death of life, moved slowly across the intersection and down Fortysecond Street to where the banner GR ND SOU HERN HOT glowed dim and indifferent overhead,

and turned in past the unwashed glass plates of the front door, past the coldeyed automaton behind the desk, who cleared his throat ominously in honor of their passing, and into the waiting elevator. Shuffles, asleep at the switch, woke with a start and rode them with hardly a glance up to the eighth floor.

The room seemed almost inviting. Madness locked outside click he turned the key. Sullen little brown face, swollen with her tears, lips turned down, eyes turned in. Life smote her tonight. He didn't know just how, but he knew. Misery likes company. Me too. I've been destroyed too. Come my dear, lay you down and we'll spend the dawn nursing our disparate and mortal wounds.

Took her by the arm, led her to the bed, and gently pushed her down. Indifferent to his touch she listlessly stripped, while he discreetly averted his eyes, barely able to stifle an inner heehaw at his own lopsided sense of the proper. When she'd dragged her feet under the cover, he drew it up to her chin and affectionately tucked her in. As he did, he looked into her face and thought he sensed, discerned an earnest query sitting there. "Don't you worry, my dear," spoken in a paternal tone, "I don't want anything from you." Almost patted her head as he spoke.

The girl gave a snarl of contempt that made him draw back as if something wild had snapped at him. "What is it?"

"Evah think I might?"

He stared at her. "What are you saying?"

Lay there, sullen, angry, hurt. "You know."

Of course. He knew. Angry colored face lying there like a deathmask in the somber gray filtered through the mangy curtains. My deathmask. My heart. He felt to where the paining played. I'm old. Too old. Turned abruptly from her couch of hurt to the window and stood staring down at the street scene, slowly preparing to come back to life once again. As it ends, so it must begin. All things the same. All matter.

Fright! that which had stalked him all night, that which had

paced him on the Greyhound cross-country flight, stood beside and giggled softly to itself. It'd been there all along, of course. His Judas, his Iago, his frightful Fear. Aider and abettor, confere in his every judgment. Easy is easier than hard. Lie down is less hard than stand up. Stand with is easier than stand against. Accept doesn't have as harsh a voice as reject. And always fear. Always a little afraid. Not child's afraid, but something from the same bloodline.

And this, his shameless blackamoor. What of her, this whore? How did she fit into the grand scheme of things? From the start had been a symbol of germ of meaning from the blasphemous mouth of Tartan Weskit and then later when he first saw her proud walk into the door before Shuffles pimp and lover the face of it had changed always but forever too had been intact that germ, that simple core of meaning. Discern it! Find it!

He didn't know. He who had spent a life plumbing to the depths knew nothing by terms of the surrender and in ignorance grasped at instinct and found him a little wizened fellow with no teeth, his mouth all puckered testimonial to a life at death's door. And yet, puckered and toothless, more dead than alive, he spoke. *Are you still alive?*

Delphic oracle? Question for question. Thought we resolved all that. That's not the point. Too late. Too late. Something else. Beyond all this rests something else the other side of the mountain a debt of penance for failure forty years of dribble and the white man's burden and why is it all going downhill? Careening like a Buick gone amuck?

Ridiculous. Absolutely silly. Pay for some intangible debt I'm not even sure I incurred. Who am I to atone for an age, a civilization? Christ? Of course not. Wrong anyway. Been converted with the rest from whatever he was to start to whatever they've become to whatever they decide he should be, condoned, in the light of their accumulated sins, folly. Pity. Poor devil on a stick. How they've twisted and torn him with their dogmas and their credos. Hemlock or cross, it's all the same.

From over by the bed heard a sob muffled in the bedsheet. Poor child. And what to do? *Play the man Master Ridgley*. Final plea: I'm old and tired, all played out? Correct and right back there at Lincoln to put the old goat out to pasture. Taught tonight just how feeble and tired. Give and give and find none took. What then? And now to give up the ghost on the rolling carcass of a fat black tart? Unkind. Poor child. Forgive. Rantings of an old man.

He walked over to the bed and stood there looking at her. The sullenness gone; the shades drawn once again. Brown shades. "How do you feel, my child?"

"All right." Lifeless, listless.

Took off his clothes, dropping them one by one to the floor, baring that poor spare Quixotian frame, lacerated in a hundred collegian windmills, flayed by the cudgels of a thousand inn-keeping pedagogues; burned 'neath the sun of a million false teachings. Cold, warmed only by the spark of hope in the hopeless black eyes, he lowered the gaunt frame to the side of the bed and drew himself in beside her under the covers. She was warm, so warm, a burning flame, brown Ceres.

Not so much conscience as doubt, a certain inflexible lack of faith, prompted her to turn her face to him and ask a question with her eyes.

And he, in the voice of a courtier long gone from the paths of this world, smiled gaily upon her and answered: "But of course my dear. Certainly we'll never know until we try." And then, placing the leonine old head down on the pillow beside her, he pressed his face into the creases in her neck and inhaled the sweet aroma of jasmine. A chemical stink to it, to be sure, but jasmine all the same.

Custom

by John Schultz

No sooner had I walked from the highway to this *Best Hotel In Town* than I dropped my bags and sample cases in the only available room, with a window that opened smack against a wall and barely room enough to sneak sideways around the bed, and headed into the hall to take a shit. No sooner would I finish the shit and I'd pretty myself up and go looking for a whore. But there I was, my gut going crazy, pacing outside a bathroom that permitted *no* distinction between guests and employees since the hotel clerk was locked in it that very moment.

You should have seen me driving in a figure-eight up and down that hall. I dodged the ceiling light every time. Evidently a man with a head on his shoulders was something new in town. Action-precision hardened the feeling of bodily control. Every time I passed the bathroom door, I kicked it—just to show the clerk my needs were as democratic as his.

A long time it took him to consider my needs.

At last the toilet flushed.

I jumped to the door. An eager turd, just waiting the chance, elbowed out of my ass. Enormously straining internally upward, as if praying myself bodily into heaven, I drew the turd back into

place, no thanks to the clerk. I heard him washing his hands with care. I wept.

He dried his hands with care. Now he was trying the lock. He took his time. There was no lock on my asshole.

I stood jittering. Passing beyond the human! A rubbery radio wave, a great stuttering tuning fork, a six-foot-six-inch hellbent hard-on!

He dawdled in the door *in my way*, the top of his bald head beaming, his brown eyes looking doggily over his glasses.

"Yes, sir? Can I help you, sir? Would you like a towel, soap, anything, sir?"

And the only command I could not give him was *to evaporate*.

"Excuse me, no thank you," I said, ducking past him into the bathroom.

You could have shoveled that air into sacks and sold it as fertilizer. I firmed my lips, held my breath. I closed and locked the door with one hand, jerking my belt loose with the other. At the stool, shoving down my shorts and pants, I stopped, seeing a brown streak on the bowl at the water's edge. And though all seemed otherwise in sterile order, I knew the seat would be *crawling* warm.

It was explode, shit, or smother.

My buttocks grimaced against the warm seat.

First came a spattering explosion. And then I unloaded a long, an unbelievably long, a miraculously lengthy turd. A lengthy sigh escaped me too. The turd broke off, and slapped into the water, and went on breaking and slapping until, after awhile, the sound changed, shit hitting softly on shit. A long-oppressed exaltation rose in me, a cool clean transfiguring peacefulness, as if I were actually ridding myself of darkness and turmoil.

And higher grew the pile.

I eat big. I live big. I shit big. I am a big man.

Now my own smell attacked and dissipated the alien stench,

and the bathroom air stood transfigured too. Almost spring air. Oh, I breathed deeply. Isn't there just one person in this world whose shit smells as good as mine?

I was almost melting with pleasure into the pile myself.

I winked at a dirty drawing on the wall.

A new town. Virgin territory. Never say never to me, that's just exactly when I'll *do* what *never* can be done. I peddle medicine, Bibles, cosmetics, photographic equipment, caskets, and I always have a new line that I'm trying. This time it was toilet equipment. Now to be able to sell a new line, you have to use it, get into it, *like* it, the way you learn new customs, meet new friends. Now I liked shitting. No, don't misunderstand me, I *really* LIKED shitting. And I was certain selling toilets would be second nature. Caskets are the hardest, my feet start shuffling, my eyes get shy and jumpy, and I'm like a kid out with his first nice girl. Am I supposed to say—"Why, Maam, I use them myself!"? I did lie in a casket all night once, to get the feel of it, believe it, *like* it, and it isn't so bad, just that every now and then you wake up and wonder why the room got so small. But caskets are profitable, almost as profitable as I'm sure selling toilets will be. I meant to get into this town, this virgin territory. I meant to leave the people hardly able to move without bumping into something they bought from me. And the quickest way to get into a new town is to get into some cunt there. Let me tell you I pump my whores more ways than one.

And there he was, the little booger, rising out of the bush between my legs.

"Just couldn't keep your nose out of all this talk about whores and virgin territory, could you, boy?"

I gave him a sly pat on the head.

The piling-up pile mushily tickled my buttocks. The smell of your own shit is good. The feel of your own shit is just shit.

I stood up.

And the moment I looked for the roll of toilet paper I knew

there would be none. And I knew I shouldn't have felt the way I did, as if I could never endure walking with my pants up again. But I wouldn't be in this predicament if I hadn't improvised myself out of other predicaments.

And there it was, firewood with thick, loose bark stacked under the hot-water heater. If God had to use clay to make man, I could use bark to wipe my ass.

I scrubbed my ass raw. I flushed the soiled bark strips down the toilet and serve right the best hotel in town if the damn thing plugged up and overflowed mossy shit clear out into the hall. What the hell did the clerk use? I suppose he walked around with an asshole caked shut that he had to knock open every time he wanted to let something out. A salesman is really a missionary, a civilizing force.

I pulled up my underwear, hefted my pants, zipped, buttoned, started buckling my belt, but didn't finish, because I could feel now that it just wasn't right. I walked aimlessly seeking around the bathroom, keeping my buttocks clinched to avoid discoloring my underwear.

I parted the shower curtains and peered into the enclosure. Like one of my coffins set on end. I don't know why it suddenly occurred to me that there might be someone hidden there. It *could* only have been that tapping noise, a leaky shower. But with all my experience on the road, I wasn't going to attribute a *reasonable* cause to every sound or movement. I looked up into the shower. The fucking thing didn't know any better than to drip right in my eye! *Best Hotel In Town*, my ass! If they ever went to a really good hotel, they'd think they were dead and in heaven, and I was just the salesman to show them the way.

I checked the door. It was locked.

There was soap in the dish on the sink. I let down my pants, satisfied with seeing my underwear still clean. I set my buttocks backwards into the sink. I lathered up suds with my hands.

Thoroughly I scrubbed and rinsed my ass. Thoroughly I dried my hands and my ass with my handkerchief. A most useful

thing the handkerchief—tourniquet, bandage, gag, substitute towel, signal, and I don't know how many other uses I've found for it. I flushed it down the toilet too.

WELL!!!

You look the way you feel, you feel the way you look. And I felt clean. And I felt good.

I stooped and there, in the mirror above the sink, *there* the old bastard was, with his hawky high cheekbones and his cunning close-set eyes. I motioned to chuck his chin with my fist. "We'll give 'em hell tonight, won't we, boy? Hot goddamn!" I smoothed my shirt, a blue shirt, long-sleeved, hanging loose around the thighs, just the thing for a whore. I combed my hair, patting it into shape. The triangle of chest-fur that I saw in the mirror reminded me of cunt, and that reminded me I should get going. I curled my chest-fur with my comb. Whores like that. When I turned my back, I had the feeling that the fellow in the mirror was still watching me, as if the person I combed and put together was the one in the mirror, not me. I touched my hair to make sure it was me I combed.

I went back to my room, got another handkerchief. Never without one, and if I started selling them, no one I met would be without one either. I leaned out the window to get a view of the town. My gaze banged against four close walls. I could have touched each of those walls with my hand, but they'd have dirtied my fingertips.

I felt so good I forgave the clerk, tossing my key right between his nose and his bookwork. I winked at his jerked-up face. I went into the street with him watching my back and appreciating the joke of where I was going. I know my hotel clerks. He said,

"Have a good time, sir."

I didn't ask him where the whorehouse was. I wanted to worm into the workings of the town the hard way. Get to know it, you know.

Hours later I was still wandering lucklessly. No street signs

in that town, and the so-called streets were really alleys, striking helter-skelter over a group of sharply rising hills. No sooner did I finish climbing the stone steps of one alley-street than I immediately descended another series of decrepit broken overgrown steps. There's no mistake that I saw plenty of women. Well-dressed women too. In ankle-length velvety-rich skirts, they paced with slow grace in gardens, on balconies, in private courts. I saw them bend from the waist, examine flowers, and the flowers lie with fat beauty in their hands. Or they reclined in sloping chairs, great flowers themselves, sipping tea or coffee. It seemed they couldn't arouse themselves, not even to talk to each other. And I never saw a man among them. They lazed in a state luxuriously satiated with waiting. I tried to think they were courtesans idling away the hours, storing up lush feelings for the evening. I ogled them over square-clipped hedges. But even my ogling head wasn't recognized by the women's eyes.

I thought they might vanish any moment. And then I began to doubt my own substance, as if I'd already vanished. My chest prickled hotly against my shirt. My eyes watered. I sighed after the bougainvillaea that ascended in rampant ruffled masses from the gardens into the balconies. I imagined them as carpets set for the descent of a fairy-tale princess and myself ready and waiting at the bottom *on my knees* if that would bring her. But I might as well have expected the flowers themselves to heed my longing. Every rose nodded yes and no. I forced my eyes politely higher.

Blue lantern-like clusters filled the acacia trees. And those jacaranda trees glowed, dozens of sunsets, throughout the late afternoon. Flowers in cataract abundance, up and down the hills, interrupted each other in beds everywhere—poinsettias, red and orange cactus flowers, petunias, geraniums, pansies, gladiolas, beds of myrtle. And always the women were somewhere near the flowers or the flowering trees. There was no sense violating my own urgency by violating them with my eyes. I

watched my feet gripping each step, carrying me up, bearing me down.

Shaking myself erect, I came briskly onto a main market street. Vendors squatted on the sidewalk beside mats piled with their wares. They made a hell of a noise hawking to passers-by.

I shoved my face down toward a screeching black-shawled girl mothering a mat full of pots and pans. I said, just like this,

"Where's the whorehouse?"

And she said,

"A hundred feet that way, and then to the left just a few doors down."

The most unabashedly open market in the world! She straitened the handle of a pan, making it conform in the rank of pans on the mat.

But another girl, standing pressed from heels to shoulders with her cheek turned against the building, said the information was only partly right. Why'd they both stand and hunch so strangely?—as if, from somewhere behind my back, a gun was pointed at everyone before me.

The second girl said,

"That's not just exactly right, sir. You go to the next corner and then go two hundred feet to the left. You can't miss it."

Such wonderfully exact directions!

Now both girls insisted the other misled me. They differed only a few feet! Indeed, it flattered my own feelings about doing things exactly, and I thought I'd get along well in this town.

I thanked them just the moment they burst at each other, shouting, spitting, shaking fists. Certainly unreasonable as their former gun-point postures of fear! Neither noticed me hurrying along the general course of their directions.

At the corner I couldn't get it out of my head that I must turn *right*. Yet *left* was said by both girls. My fear of making a mistake and the urgency of my desire pushed and pulled, intensified. I threw myself into the street to the left. All deep holes

and crumbling cobblestone. Going up out of one hole and down into the next, a two-legged jeep six and a half feet tall, that was me, working my way past one-story bright-colored jammed-together stucco houses. *No* windows. Just big shut oaken doors. And then the street upended sharply ascending a hill again. Could I just knock on any door and ask anyone if this was the whorehouse? But it wasn't the open market place. It was a very private little side street, very empty collecting evening light. I doubled my fists. I wiped my eyes. I raged. I snatched a stone and hurled it up the hill. A second after the stone hit, rattling, there came a quick, poignant cry.

I scrambled up the steps. But it was the *same* thing, women walking and lazing on balconies, in gardens. Now my throat went bitter. Now I suspected that these were the town's true whores and customs were different here. But *no* part of the world asks you to climb over fences into private gardens *with your money in your hand*. Really those women seemed in the preserve of some Important Man, where they prepared themselves for maybe one day's extraordinary activity each year.

I hopped, stumbling, down a rocky slope, intending to short cut to the girls in the market place. At the foot of the hill I rolled off balance over a retaining wall.

Picking myself up I faced a window as large as the wall itself, divided by blue frames into small squares all frilled with ivy. A roomful of bustling continued inside it. Very private-minded with their windows in the walls behind the streets. It drew me forward entranced without shame. I cupped my hands at my temples and pushed my nose through the ivy against the glass. The living room became deeply clear. Several children and a woman were playing with ships, building blocks, every sort of toy. A lavishly decorated Christmas tree stood in the corner like a tall hero waiting for another medal to be pinned on. So it was that time of year? And I thought sadly I don't even remember my best holidays anymore.

Suddenly the woman leaped up from the knee-deep turmoil,

in a yellow blouse and brown skirt, and ran smack toward me. She threatened crashing through the window. I threw up my arms. A section of the window jumped open beside me, a door.

Breathlessly tossing her shoulder-length brown hair, she said, with rich casual hospitality,

"It's Christmas and I know you are a stranger here. Won't you come in and share Christmas with us awhile? I'm Mrs. Tarrington."

How could she have known me so surely? Her hands flew quivering about her body, never quite lighting. Willowy, but maternally full where it counted, she was skittish and squirmy as a young mare on spring pasture, chic as a first-night royal bride, with always the air of the nursery.

Her hand darted into my hand. I feared crushing its fluttering life.

"You don't even know me," I said.

"Nonsense, do please come in."

Her quick white and winning smile leashed and drew me with her hand. That woman must have been a foot shorter than me, but I always seemed to be looking gratefully *up* at her. And then I jolted with the thought that *this* was the whorehouse, the strangest, the most enticing in the world. Why else be so eager for my company?

Inside she hooked a bawling boy under his arms, swung him upright. She helped him straighten his train on the track.

"Now this is no place to be shy," she said, "please play with us."

Might as well shit or piss as grin the way I did.

My fingers throbbed digging into the carpet. I strove to keep my head low so the kids wouldn't treat me as a foreigner. Mrs. Tarrington traipsed from child to child, giving praise, guidance, caution. I played with an erector set. She was pleased discovering that I was building a ship.

I said, brazenly jerking up my head,

"Where is your husband?"

"Oh, he left on some business. And what difference does it make? He won't come back for quite awhile."

"A shame he can't enjoy himself with us," I said.

I noticed that we were all boys. I had the feeling a little girl sneaked among us, but I could never turn quick enough to see her.

And then we only wanted to play with the ships.

Everyone was pushing ships. She saw our irritation with the way the carpet roughened the ships' movements. She said, with a dreamy abruptness that intrigued the whole room,

"Now here's a game we play when we tire of everything else."

Her hips moved with easy grace avoiding collisions with furniture. She approached a huge faucet that protruded from a wall across the room. Kids were rushing around my legs, picking up toy trains and trucks. The only inside door stood at the wall-end of a landing that jutted about five feet high into the room. Steps led down the front of the landing to floor level. Arms jam-full of toys, the kids dashed up these steps and through that door.

With a sailor's lanky leg-bending sureness Mrs. Tarrington worked the faucet's wheel-shaped handle.

An inundation poured out, spreading through the living room, already flowing over my uppers and creeping up my ankles. Toy ships were jogged afloat, rocking on the waves, the building blocks among them. How could I protest? I've been in many strange places and seen many strange customs, and it's my business to accept and figure their reasons. But, with water steadily rising up each leg like a tickling ring, I sure needed clothespins to keep that polite expectant grin clipped on my face.

The kids came running back through the door, no toys with them. They leaped screaming into the water. I was up to my thighs, and the kids were up to their necks, walking on tiptoe or swimming for dear life.

Her brown skirt drifted ballooning on the thundering turbulence around her waist, her slip floating out from under it.

She was like a flower coming apart. Breathless, I tell you, with the water ever rising.

She spun the wheel and the flow ceased.

Ah, there were limits, there were rules! Now I understood why the door opened onto the landing, and why the entire room was waist-deep below ground level, a system built into the building and into the mind!

Buoyantly Mrs. Tarrington smiled over bobbing children's heads and toy ships. She waded hard through the melee. She cheered herself with her hands above her head. Clap, clap. "That's that. Now we play with the ships. And it's almost real, isn't it?"

With a grin supported by all my teeth and gums, I said, "Remarkable. How on earth do you manage it, Mrs. Tarrington?"

"Traditions that have been in the family for years and generations aren't at all difficult to do. You know that."

"One could travel to the ends of the earth," I said, "and never cease seeing how clever people are."

Shouting children hopped straight up and down in the water. Scooting, paddling, darting, they played motorboat with their mouths and pushed and turned the toy ships before their heads, as if the ships were only slightly disengaged parts of themselves. Lovingly and skillfully they were well acquainted with this custom. Any moment I might discover its purpose too. Mrs. Tarrington wrapped her hands delicately water level at her waist. With bright hummingbird quickness her eyes went from child to child. Heartily I knew I could learn this custom conducted in secret by mother and children. Energetically I could learn it, until it became second nature, the way I sell things.

I desired less and less height.

I sank on bending knees up to my neck. Soft and warm, that water, with the special feel of a juicing-up cunt. Little waves tickled under my chin.

My prick swelled and would give me no comfort trying to

nudge out. I unzipped. It stiffened up with long eager ease. I feared it would reach my chin.

A ship loomed by each boy's head. I don't know how I got attached to a *totally unarmed* merchant vessel. Islands and promontories jutted everywhere. Behind them warships hid and sprang ambushes. A terribly complex sea. But I was grimly conscious that I must pilot my bulky lovable merchantman, wallowing from harbor to harbor, carrying great important cargoes, the very guts and goings of civilization. My spraddled legs duck-walked, my submarine prick rode between them, an underwater guard. Destroyers, cruisers, battleships slid from the most unlikely places, with *me* as their target. You have no idea how unnerving it is to peer into a five-year-old's face and then to watch, helplessly, a battleship, come from behind his grinning head, bear down on you. I aimed toward the nearest green harbor. Yes, I know now the harbor was only an armchair with a white doilie dressing its top, but so inviting to rest in the green harbor under the snowy mountains after the dangerous journey. More than once I wished to transfer my ship's cargo to my submarine prick, but there seemed no getting the one into the other, while incredible noises ruined the air, blasting cheers and salvos of splashing. I banished the terrors by ducking my head underwater. I guided my submarine gripped in one hand and pushed my merchantman blindly on the surface with the other. Then I became uncertain where was water and where was air. Violently I coughed. All around me voices were shouting that I was *sunk*, a simple merchantman wending his way with honorable cargo.

Vehemently I denounced their barbaric interruptions of free neutral commerce. And with revivalist vigor and sincerity I proclaimed the natural rights of merchantmen as granted by God when He first created ships.

A hand patted my head. Far above me Mrs. Tarrington sang, "Really now, it's not as if you don't have another chance."

I groveled down into the water and wrapped my arms around her legs. I looked up. I sighed.

I choked. I shot up fast but stopped with my chin against the water, coughing horribly, not wishing to rise above this height. My hard-on prick hovered between my legs.

"How absolutely silly you are," she said.

"Yes, silly, silly, silly," I said.

"Shame on you. Don't you know children get tired of adults playing with them."

"I do get tired," I said.

"Are you ever going to listen to me?"

I whispered with intimate fear, "Don't do anything but say what you mean."

Her hands hooked under my arms and pulled.

"Now we don't want to remind the children of their father do we?"

I couldn't help but notice myself becoming coldly father-big. I looked over the inundated furniture, over the playing children, through the window, where the sunset fretted the slope. A fair-weather friend, my submarine prick, if I ever saw one.

"You don't want to do that," she said.

I zipped up with secret ease.

"I mustn't do that," I said.

I understood that I must rise. My water-logged clothes dragged me down. I strove. She pulled. The water surface shaped itself with great elastic strength over my entire straining back and held me down. A back-breaking ball-busting effort burst me up to full dripping height, shaking beside her.

"How absolutely *silly* you were! And how the children did enjoy you! I *do* wish my second husband would play with them like that."

"Such fun," I said. "A man should play with his kids."

And the light went dark in her features and manner, or maybe it was the sun going down outside. "You are so right," she said. "But do you know that he always leaves the room when I turn the water on? And I can't stand him that way. And I can't stand not turning the water on either. And I know it's because he

doesn't want to be reminded of my first husband. And I don't want to remind him. I don't do it out of spite. Just this time I turned the water on because that was the way to welcome you."

I was too proudly embarrassed and knew it wasn't the moment to try fucking her to comfort her.

I slipped my arm around her and rested my hand on her thigh underwater. I twitched my fingertips on her thigh, only to accustom her to the idea that my hands would *move* when touching her.

Gigantic side by side, we surveyed the ocean's activity.

"And the children love it so," she said. And I thought she'd weep right there.

"Such a truly unusual custom. Such a *fine*, satisfying thing," I said, "for kids."

She swayed on my arm, looking beautifully distracted up at me. "Are you really interested?"

My pants were soaked, but not down. My trusty smile was ready. "Mrs. Tarrington, such original, such gracious traditions can't miss getting my interest and care."

"I can see you are really, you are actually very fine. You are worthy. Wait here."

As if against tides she waded all forward-fighting purpose to the landing. She climbed up on all fours, her head hanging between her arms, gasping.

She stepped toward the door, her wet skirt wrinkling like a second skin against her thighs. She said across her shoulder,

"You will see, see everything, I promise."

She disappeared.

And there I was deserted among those that sank my ship. *Unprincipled warfare*, they were ganging up on another innocent merchantman in a corner across the ocean. It touched me poignantly using him to keep their attention while I side-stepped with surging legs through the difficult water into the corner behind the Christmas tree. I solidified with fright when a tinsel

ball tinkled against my nose. But the full-scale persecution made so much noise they missed important little sounds.

Ever tighter my arms pressed against my sides until I was certain I resembled the shape of the tree itself. And there is no more perfect concealment than looking exactly like what you're hiding behind. But I couldn't be sure that I was really hidden so long as I could see through the cedar branches. I saw the merchantman sinking. I closed my eyes. I grieved, marvelously hidden behind the tree with my eyes shut tight, while those rabid children went victory-crying after other game.

Only when Mrs. Tarrington returned could I afford to become more exposed by opening my eyes.

On the edge of the landing, clutching some things against her breasts, she peered around, disbelieving hurt in her face and the hunch of her shoulders. My smile prickled against the cedar needles. A warm and absolute sense of safety went pungently deep into me, soothing every muscle, secure in every way, even into my spleen. Yes, a perfect hiding place is miraculously relaxing, better than a hot bath.

She called to the kids. They didn't obey or even listen. Her head was turned away from me. Legs breaking against the resilient water, I waded fast from behind the tree. Now she wouldn't know where I'd been hiding and that would be like hiding behind the tree, always my own, the tree, in my mind.

"Oh, *there* you are. Where *have* you *been*?"

I shrugged grandly. "I've been here all the time."

"You have not," she said. More and more she mocked a little girl's enticements.

"If you don't look directly at me I'm hard to see," I said.

"Don't speak so strangely."

"Nothing strange when you look directly at me."

"Don't make fun. It's all because of you I went out to get these things. Now *hurry*."

I understood that her husband might return any minute. Only

a second husband to be sure, but nevertheless a husband.

My legs piston-drove toward her. It wasn't water. I know now it couldn't have been water. Powered only by the thought that I mightn't reach her before her husband's arrival, I became certain that time is properly measured only by the size of the effort, the amount of spent energy. And if that's true, it took me a solid year to get to her.

By the time I gained the landing, my thigh muscles knotted, aching together. Agonizing, with my thumbs and fingertips clamped on the upper edge of the landing, I pulled myself up an inch at a time toward her, struggling up the steps on my knees underwater.

"What in heaven's name is the matter with you? Hurry, can't you?"

Sweat oiled the water over my body. The mixture flowed off my brow, burned in my eyes, and tears joined sweat and water. My blood vessels would burst and rushing blood would join sweat, water, tears too. I mustn't resist dissolving. I must ease into solution. I more than suspected that total dissolution was the real end to this curious custom. And I was tempted to get it over with right now.

She coaxed with disparaging sympathy.

"It is tiring if you're not used to it and not in shape."

I am never too tired to grin suggestively. "Yes, my exercise is limited."

Hugely dripping I hauled my mass up beside her on the landing. It was just too thoughtful of her to sit on her heels and save me the major shame of failure in rising to my feet.

With the back of my hand I wiped the bitter solution out of my eyes and my hand wiped it burning in again. I was terrifically concerned that I might be near to expending the last of my life energy before it could be renewed in me. *How did the kids have it so porpoise-easy?* Simple. If you immersed yourself, you had it easy. If you stood up against it, you had it rough. I rested my gaze with

extreme care on the things in her hand. A photograph and a naval officer's cap.

She said,

"This is his hat."

I nodded. "That is his hat."

She said,

"You know nothing about the sea and sailing."

I spent no precious energy saying I'd no desire to learn more. And I knew I was on the point of giving up the ghost when I said, "You could teach me, couldn't you?"

"You'll just have to imagine for yourself. See this?"

The photograph vibrated between her thumb and finger.

"You have to look closely," she said.

Getting larger, no, coming closer, the photograph loomed blotting out the kids raising a terrific rumpus. A sickness stuck like a dart into the bottom of my belly.

"May I?" I took the photograph. I lowered it to knee level. I know when to be polite.

I looked up away from the water and out the window, remembering myself happy among the flowering trees and looking for a whore. *Why wasn't Mrs. Tarrington wearing a velvety ankle-length dress?*

She jabbed the photograph. My face and feelings shook offended.

"Do you know what that is?" She answered herself, "That is his ship."

I said,

"That is his ship."

Now my eyes cleared, and I saw toss-tipped waves in the foreground, a ship on the horizon in the background, all marred with scratches and blurs. A bad developing job. But I didn't sense in myself the least anticipation for making a mint selling photographic equipment. Salesmen are necessary only among the higher orders of civilization. This town needed doctors.

She prodded the photograph, calling my attention to a naval officer's cap floating in the craw of a yawning wave.

"It is *his* hat," she said. "It is *this* hat."

And the hat jumped on her finger, a clever movement, imprinted terribly forever in my mind. I knew now I couldn't elude the story in the pinkish-gray stain across the white on top the hat.

She began,

"His name was SHIPLEY," an unforgettable emphasis as clever as jumping the cap on her finger. "It was in the Antarctic and Shipley fell, yes, *fell*, or perhaps, *only* perhaps, he slipped off the deck. *Or* he jumped. Did you know a man can freeze solid in that water in two minutes?"

"Two minutes," I said.

"You don't believe that?"

"I believe."

"I tell you," she said, "Shipley could swim twenty miles and only that cold, cold water stopped him."

"Only that," I echoed.

"A strong man, a brave man, and sure on his feet."

"And froze solid in two minutes," I said, "*a remarkable* man."

Her voice changed.

"So remarkable on his feet I can't believe he slipped."

My feet and shoes embarrassed me with sucking noises. "Yes?"

Contemptuously she said,

"I am *certain* he did not slip. He did not fall. He did it *deliberately*."

She paused, working every way to truss up my attention so she could drive her point home. How could I tell her I was as ready now as I'd ever be?

"No-o-o-o," she said, "it was something Shipley saw in the water. He was leaning there on the rail and he saw *something* in the water." I peered into her eyes to show her I truly saw the something she meant just as clearly as he'd seen something in the water. "A man," she breathed, "he saw a *man* in the water." Her

eyes got shiny, blinking, and now it was time and I put my arm around her shoulders. "A man in the water, yes, Shipley saw *himself* in the water. I *know* that's how it happened. All bundled up for that cold, cold weather he didn't recognize his *own* reflection. So strong and so brave and so sure on his feet he jumped *in*—to save the man, to save *himself*, without a second *thought*!"

"And froze solid in two minutes," I said.

"Yes, yes, *yes*," she cried, beating her fists on her lap one two *three*, herself into silence, telling the story and no reverence from me. I'd gone in over my head once. Not again. I cuddled my arm closer around her shoulder.

"*Look*," she said, pointing one finger at the photograph and then shaking it at me, "the only reason why we have the photograph is they sent out a boat as soon as he went over, or as soon as they could stop the ship and lower a boat, and that was too late. Oh, yes," as if I mustn't believe all that other gossip, "many men were jealous of his strong goodness and that may explain why he was never rescued."

She fished a handkerchief out of her bosom, blew her nose, and stuffed the handkerchief back hastily, as if she'd sneezed gold and didn't want anyone to find out that this was the way she lived so well, afforded all these shenanigans.

"A seaman," her voice got stentorian, "a man of the ranks who loved Shipley's firm goodness, that was the man who took this picture from the boat before they picked the hat out of the water. And that's all I have to remember him by. Oh, there should have been more, *much* more, so much that I can hardly endure having so little of him, only the hat, this photograph and—the custom!" She spread both arms to embrace the flood.

I said,

"That's enough, isn't it?"

"Everything was made just so before we moved into this place. Everything according to *his* family's tradition. The walls. The

floor. The furniture. The windows. All watertight and waterproof. All made of material that can't be damaged or discolored by water. And the faucet was installed, with special plumbing. And Shipley swung me up and carried me across the threshold. You should have seen him, the way he turned on the faucet, twirling it grandly with his little finger, and we splashed around stark naked playing ship on our wedding night. So long ago," she sighed. She shrieked, "*Stark NAKED*," as if I mightn't believe that either.

Maybe that's why the kids were so wild. A little of that peculiar water dashed into the semen.

She didn't notice my hand sneaking up her thigh, past the casing of stocking, suddenly lost in a twanging maze of garters. Crazy with wargames, nothing turned those kids' heads either, not even their mother's screeching sing-song or their mother's legs spread for their eyes to see with a stranger's hand between them. If I'd pulled up her dress and rammed in my prick, she'd just wrapped her arms and legs around me, praising Shipley, who probably didn't have the sense to hold his nose jumping into the Antarctic sea. And the kids would go on BANG-POW-SPLASH-WHAMMING.

Incisively rude, I said,

"I just can't see why a naval officer would build a home in a town so far from the sea."

"Oh, that was part of his sea-going family's custom too. He didn't want us to live where we might hear rumors, most likely *exaggerated* rumors, you understand, about the sea, but how would we know if they were *exaggerated*? Worry us too much, Shipley thought. And he didn't want us running out onto a hilltop to look for ships on the horizon. Best, he thought, if we just saw him leave and walk away one morning on dry land and no sea in sight, and then months later saw him come walking back on dry land. So kind, so considerate."

My hand was snared in the garters under her dress. I gave it up as caught and lost forever. I prepared myself to bite, oh gently bite her neck.

She untangled herself without a thought, the way she'd push back the covers and crawl out of bed. My hand came undone, falling out of her dress. It lay in my lap. I looked at it. An absurd, useless hand. Couldn't even bring a blush to the face of another man's wife.

And nothing could stop her giddy steady voice, sweeping sex as dust away.

"We used to have coffee and cookies on this landing, and watch the children play ship, celebrating when Shipley came home. You know, you remind me of Shipley, something about your *manner*." She squeezed the absurd hand in my lap. "Would you like coffee and cookies? Of course you would, just for me? Oh, BETTT-EEEE!"

My helpless body jumped, as if touched by a free-floating electrical charge. Clucking and cooing and purring and patting my shoulder, that jumped under her hand too, she said,

"Some people are so affected by the story, it gets at them so much, they become *physically* miserable. And then it is so-o-o soothing to have coffee and cookies and watch the children play. BETTT-EEEE!"

I always turn when a door opens, always expecting something new. This time I wasn't disappointed. I saw that I'd been spending my time in the wrong room in that house.

Tall, with black hair, blue eyes, crisp green uniform and a white apron, the maid leaned through the door, as if also leaning backward against the weight of her bosoms. She moved with care too. And it did seem highly likely that one sudden movement might throw her off balance. So widely and deeply she looked at me that I thought if she blinked I'd be cut in two.

There must be no mistake in our communication. I intensified the hot expression in my own eyes. If she wouldn't do it, she'd know where it was done. I know my maids.

"Yes'm?" she said.

Mrs. Tarrington answered with a matron's curt jealousy. Anyway, her tone nearly made me forget that Mrs. Shipley-Tarrington was young and desirable herself, at least at first glance.

"Isn't it beautiful, Betty? It's been months and months, years maybe, since we turned the water on. How long *has* it been, Betty?"

"Months and months, mum. Years maybe."

With my eyes I tried hard to inform Betty that such a long time of going without would soon end.

"Yes, Betty, dear, but that's only calendar time, mere *clock* time. Heart time's been centuries." And Mrs. Tarrington's face lit up on the play of the children, teamed into two grim navies that closed toward each other over the water, heads behind boats, one navy green, the other brown.

Hand on her hip, Betty cocked her inconsiderate body through the door. A heat trembled in my belly, lungs, and groin. My jaws worked as if against some strong elastic substance.

Outrightly condescending, Betty said,

"Mum, do you want coffee and cookies?"

"You remember so well, dear." Mrs. Spectator-Tarrington didn't turn to see Betty looking snottily down on her, and didn't notice me looking at Betty either.

Betty firmed her lips with spite. "In a moment, mum." She jammed the door shut.

A moment, a moment, only *one* moment, I instructed my surging balls and prick.

Mrs. Shipley-Tarrington brooded rapturously in the part of the wargames-observer, with flushed face, full slack lips, half-lidded eyes. "Look," she said, "at the cruisers flanking wide and the battleships lying back for the opening and the kill. I tell you Shipley taught them everything. How to do it right. How doing it right was better than making the kill."

I listened with the same thrill as hiding behind the Christmas tree.

"Both sides so equal," I said, "it must be difficult for one or the other to win."

"*Very* difficult. Sometimes, even with the most skillful maneu-

vering, it goes on for hours and hours and that's what counts, the *art*, even in your own living room."

I was jarred again. I hadn't thought of this place as a "living room" for some time.

The door jerked behind us. Almost my fly sprang open with it.

Betty's white-shoed foot nudged the door wide enough to permit passage sideways of the tray with the silver service. A man could say, if he wished, that her high young huge breasts were also borne on that tray. I wished to say it, and I wished to shout victoriously to the kids in the water to quit that vicious silliness and come and learn that *here* was the *real* game.

Betty lowered herself between Mrs. Tarrington and me. And I could see that the silver tray was also contrived to suit the family custom, resting on a real-sized life buoy. I suppose that it served to send aid and sustenance to the shipwrecked in the living room.

"Oh, *look* at the cookies," Mrs. Tarrington said, "oh, Betty, dear, you are *so* considerate, you remember *so* well."

The cookies were shaped like ships—cruisers, battleships, destroyers, aircraft carriers. Yes, it was true that I had the only submarine.

Betty worked with her arms bowed out avoiding her breasts, as if they were sore with their beauty.

"Cream this time, mum?"

"Straight black. And two cruisers, please."

When Betty turned to me, her lush smile clutched on her lips, her eyes widened. My whole body tipped, ready to dive into her.

I grinned. "With cream."

"Cream," Betty assented, liquidly prim. "Say when, sir." And she poured cream into my coffee until it almost overflowed and I said, "*When?*" meaning *no* coffee and cream could mix as well as me and her.

"And two battleships," I said.

Over the cookie tray my absurd hand unmistakably sparked

against Betty's hand. Her startled lips and eyes jumped at me. My smile threatened to split my face as my prick was splitting my fly as Betty rose and departed with silky flurries and rustlings that raved in my groin.

Behind Mrs. Tarrington's back my eyes screwed onto Betty's eyes. Betty back-kicked the door shut.

"Oh, *oh*," Mrs. Shipley-Tarrington moaned, "an opening *already*."

Near the big armchair's back protruding above the water, two green cruisers had straddled one brown battleship. I clucked my tongue tch-tch. "Now that's *art*," I said.

"It's *terrible*," she said.

"Yes, I've heard wars are like that."

"*Terrible* that they've forgotten so much. I must take the chance on whatever Mr. Tarrington thinks and turn the water on more often, much more often, lest they forget."

"Speaking of forgetting," I said, "it seems your girl forgot the sugar. Excuse me, will you, Mrs. Tarrington, a moment?" And there I was, devil that I am, being *so* polite again. But Mrs. Shipley-Tarrington, black-coffee-drinking-wargames-observer, didn't notice me rising and exiting. Her shining eyes were ravishing the two cruisers circling the ambushed battleship, while she held her coffee cup trembling at her lip.

My damp pants thrummed against my legs. I wished to kick the kitchen door open, enter triumphantly. But I knew when to control myself, and closed the door softly, click, behind me.

I was *in* the kitchen, and I was almost ready to get *into* the town too, remembering my progress from outside among flowers and distant women, to the laborious scene in the living room, to the kitchen now, to the inside of Betty in a minute, and I'd come out just dripping with a working feeling for this town.

Across the kitchen Betty stood at a table, using a rolling pin, thumping and rolling a round of dough on a board. A window black with night framed her head and shoulders. She hadn't

heard me come in. I tiptoed. Great pleasure it gave me to stand an arm's length behind her, with her well-shaped back peacefully toward me and her hair fanning down it. Now she stamped out the ships with cookie-cutters and placed them in a buttered pan. Let me tell you, when I get with a tall hot woman and we both start coming, our thrashing threatens to bring the house down around us.

I whispered with insidious glee,

"There was no sugar, Betty."

Her hand stopped in mid-air with the cookie cutter. A pause. And then stamped down. She didn't turn, but her back registered my presence frankly. That's what I loved in her body, its *frankness*.

"Well, sir, do you want sugar?"

My hot wrinkly hands grasped her elbows, smooth as cool sunlight, just below the cuffed sleeves. An apt beginning, a variation on the firm handshake.

"Betty, *oh*, Betty, you can't think you'll find the sugar all by yourself."

I drew her backwards until her butt pressed against my hard-on prick. YES-S-S, I wanted her to feel the same dirty driving lust that a dog feels rubbing its side against a post. I tickled her neck with my tongue. I probed the inner workings of her ear. She shook her head hard.

"Sugar's in the *pantry*, sir."

"Sugar's where you find it, baby."

Now, not just her words, her body became a liar too. I grappled her around the waist, locking my hands together on her belly. She writhed upward against me and pushed down hard on my arms, pushing my hands below her belly. My hands went delving through her dress. Sad the way she used seeming accident to guide me.

She whispered run-on with a pretense of warning,

"Mrs. Tarrington. Mrs. Tarrington. Mrs. Tarrington."

"She's getting hers in her own way," I said.

My prick jammed against the cleft of her ass. Terribly she thrashed. Maybe she was only trying to make the game as exciting as possible with struggle short of actual escape. But she made me seem to myself like some fool at a circus, jacking myself off with one hand and holding onto seven fighting cats with the other.

My chin was hooked over her shoulder. My fingers worked in her crotch, pulling up her dress until it was wadded under my wrists. My hands crawled downward against her rough panties, already *wet* and *warm*. Anything I can't stand, it's a *liar*. My God, how many times had I sighed in that house?

I tried inserting my hand under the bellyband of her panties. It wouldn't go. I tried again. That elastic was strong. I tried getting under the leg bands.

Strong, that elastic, unbelievably, intractably tight and strong.

Panicky, but I couldn't dally. If I wasn't the man to make her good and ready to take her panties off, I don't know who that man would be. I rubbed on the down-curve between her legs. My fingers got slick as pickles and the groove formed, yielding. That panting itch began in my belly and lungs. I rubbed rapidly. I rubbed deeply. I rubbed gently. I used all the attributes of good rubbing. I increased my speed and it was her whole thrashing body, not just her voice, that *gasped*.

She whirled in my arms. She kissed me, her tongue digging in my mouth. That woman was *hungry*. She jerked my belt open. She unzipped me. My pants slipped down my legs onto the floor. My shorts were more difficult and hung at last between my knees. It was time to put on my rubbers, but she wouldn't give me a moment, and for the first time in my life I decided to risk it without them.

She cuddled prick and balls with both hands, kissing prick's tight little mouth. She wasn't speaking to me, she was speaking to *him* with those heated reverent gasps,

"Sh! Sh! Sh!"

She was right to talk to him and not to me.

They rubbed cheek to cheek. They looked at each other.

And then she popped his head into her mouth and slid it up and down and sucked and licked slowly. An incredibly high-pitched shriek sailed past the hearing of humans, out of the kitchen, and into the range of dogs perhaps, but I still don't know whether it came from me or my prick. Ecstatically I beat her back with my fists. She hungered with groans and hmmm-mms. And then she forgot that she had teeth in her mouth.

I shoved her backwards onto the round of dough on top the table, and the panful of cookies jumped, clattering cookie tins.

I grabbed her panties at the hips with both hands and yanked. *Strong*, that elastic, *very strong*.

She wrestled herself up into a sitting position on the edge of the table.

"Sh. Sh."

Spreading her legs wide, she took hold of prick and pulled. She pressed him into the sopping warm groove. Absurdly she joggled her butt up and down.

So this was the way she meant for us to fuck? No sense fighting her panties. She seemed as helpless as me. How in God's name did she pee? For all I knew Mrs. Tarrington might have been responsible and Betty couldn't get out anymore than I could get in. I moved in accordance with her wishes. Happy fellow, my prick, sliding up and down in the groove. My excitement dug deep and climbed high, wrecking me from top to bottom.

"Oh please don't stop. Oh please don't stop."

She couldn't possibly so underestimate me.

And then I wanted to get into the raving gripping real screw. I tried forcing prick to flatten and slip under the elastic and seek his own as water seeks its own. "Why are you so fucking *round*, you fucking prick?" But prick was totally unsuited to present needs. That elastic was as watertight as everything else in this house. And then I knew past doubt Mrs. Tarrington was responsible for Betty's imprisonment. I shouted,

"GODDAMN MRS. TARRINGTON!"

And it inspired us. In our strange way, we fucked harder.

A crisp click. A bracing white light sprang and exposed the edged shapes of everything in the kitchen. Words poured into my ears, craze-gripping as ice water.

"Is this what you call getting the sugar?"

Like a load of wood Betty dropped from my arms onto the table. Over her head I saw a face in the window drift immediately away. That's about all I have to do sometimes, look at people and they know where they should go.

A vision of how I appeared from behind came to me. My blue sports shirt hung over my lard-colored buttocks, with my shorts strung like a clothesline between my hairy knees, my pants heaped around my feet on the floor. Yes, I had more sense than to turn and add another decoration to Mrs. Spectator's sight.

Some women of her class and kind would shriek and stamp their feet and be just a bustling bundle of indignation, as if stamping out a fire that threatened their entire home. Others might be cold and haughty and clear the situation with a few cutting orders. Others might just run away in violently pleased embarrassment.

But Mrs. Shipley-Tarrington stayed a spectator.

"My husband is coming home soon."

I said,

"*Which* husband?"

She answered plaintively,

"Maids are hard enough to get."

"This one isn't." And I laughed heartily in the infectious way necessary to get a conversation started with a so-so joke. Nine times out of ten it works. But from the silence I judged we were probably outside the sphere of ordinary laws.

Surprisingly Betty didn't object to my remark. Heartwarming, that girl's trust.

I tried another sure thing. I tried changing the subject.

"Which navy won? Green?"

"Brown." Mrs. Spectator's word fell with the bounce of one round hard turd.

"But that's not the way it looked when I left," I said.

She said,

"That's the way it is now."

"Well," I said, "you never can tell what's going to happen, you have to keep in touch all the time. So Brown won? Well, what do you know about that?"

"You unspeakable person, if you knew anything about a mother's feelings, you would leave right now."

"Then why are you so hot on talking to me?"

"My husband has much influence in this town. *Quit* talking yourself."

"I wonder what he's going to say when he sees the water on in the living room?"

"I don't think he will bother to go as far as the living room."

"Think he'll die before he gets there, hunh?"

It was obvious she wasn't going to dirty her hands cleaning up any shit. And the whole business was so botched I knew I might as well get my private kicks.

"My husband is past mayor. My husband is so respected that whoever he wants is elected to any office and will do anything he says."

And I said,

"Leave it to you to marry another remarkable man."

Bang, the kitchen door struck on the edge of mine and Betty's table. A man almost exactly my height stood in the doorway, a red tie slashing down the front of his dark business suit. Astonishing how quickly you *saw* his icy gray eyes and the slicked-back blond hair that seemed carved on his head.

He folded his arms, elegant creases filling out from the elbows, so immaculately still, correct in every respect, his pants sharp, his lips and manner creased and certain too. The most distin-

guished mannequin in a men's store! It was hard to believe he'd ever committed such violence as banging open the door.

I remembered when I'd folded my arms like that on the occasions when I was acknowledged master. Now, myself a salesman in a strange town, I was in professional need of clothing my image in other people's minds with this most important man's approval. And here I was hardly clothed for meeting him.

Admirable presence of mind, he loosened his arms and said with a brisk paternal sigh,

"I might have known."

Mrs. Shipley-Tarrington pressed against a cabinet giving way to him as he marched through the kitchen. I saw her face and neck taut, the drained-out color of dirty chalk.

Betty hugged me, as if trying to hide in me.

All attention, from myself and Mrs. Spectator, went out of the kitchen, zeroed on Tarrington. He paused on the landing and surveyed the living room. He gave a most royal sigh and stepped with tall precision down into the water. Children splashed to meet him, shouting, "Daddy, daddy, daddy, come and play," dancing and batting their hands on the water.

Betty shoved me away. I couldn't believe my eyes when she started stamping out cookies again.

No, I *wasn't* surprised that the lordly Tarrington waded, shoes and pants, up to his elegant thighs. A clever gesture of restrained and noble suffering, that's what it was, placing everyone around him in the status of shamed children. But now he did surprise me. He plucked up each sleeve from the wrist. This senseless action shamed us more as he stooped and slipped his arms, sleeves and all anyway, into the water, struggled, and came up straight with a big drain plug in one hand.

A whirlpool swung suddenly out around his legs. In a moment only a few puddles glistened on the carpet. And Mrs. Tarrington was right, the furniture shed water, showing not a mark of soaking or discoloration. Ships were stranded on cushions, teetered on the arms of sofas, and lay on their sides on the carpet, such was the violence of the water's disappearance.

Now the children stayed several steps away from him. And they stayed still, with fingers hanging in their mouths.

Tarrington said to them,

“Put those toys away,” and the group of children wavered as one, and then scattered as individuals, and began picking up the toys.

I shuffled, shorts around my knees, toward the kitchen door. And there was my prick, staying up all this time. I suppose he didn’t want to miss the show.

I leaned against the door jamb. Betty hunched diligently, trying to disappear into making those goddamned cookies. Surely she knew that Tarrington abhorred this particular celebration. But maybe she wished to insult His Majesty by carrying out Mrs. Spectator’s orders. Or she wished to get Mrs. Spectator in deeper trouble. Or Betty wanted to get herself in his disfavor. Or she wanted to cause an anger in him that would make havoc of everyone and everything. Only a jackass could believe she was just working off nervous energy. Maybe she wasn’t really a liar. She just wasn’t aware that she was lying.

“If you’re really in bad trouble, Betty, I can get you lots of jobs, and better pay too.”

I had one particular job in mind for her.

Clever girl, she spoke down to the rolling pin, so no one could suspect us. “Oh, don’t worry, sir. You can see they have to pay very well to get any maid to stay in this house and despite Mr. Tarrington’s so-called influence hardly no one will do it. Oh, I’m safe, sir, snug, sir.”

There was something hunchbacked with spite in Betty. It fired up my balls for her.

“That’s why you’re going ahead and making the cookies, just to prove they can’t fire you. You’re smart, Betty. I like you.”

I winked. I mentioned my hotel just in case she was really in trouble. Hope a hope a hope.

“Thank you, sir.”

A comradely feeling warmed us together.

“Betty,” I whispered, “where is the whorehouse?”

Her blue eyes looked up pitifully scooped out by fear.

"It's just down to the corner," she said. And I was heartened that she didn't say "sir."

But I knew about directions in this town.

"How far is that, Betty?"

"Going left out the door, it's at the first corner, sir. A blue-fronted house, you can't miss it."

"Right or left side?"

"Your left, sir, going that way. It's very expensive, sir."

"Good," I said, with a laugh meant to loot her soul and body.

And she could go on "sirring" me forever, if she kept on smiling that way. "Maybe I'll see you in the cafés," she said.

"Tonight?"

"I go there once or twice a week," she said.

Her eyes steamed with that deep exciting peace again.

I meant to ask which café, but my presence of mind went prostrate, seeing the Law himself striding across the living room, up the landing in two steps, scooping up the naval officer's cap and the photograph, and into the kitchen, where he thrust cap and photograph into his wife's hands.

"Burn these right now," he said.

Apparently it was only the cabinet that supported Mrs. Shipley-Tarrington.

"Please," she said.

"All right," he said, "*please* burn them right now."

She went down on her knees slowly.

"*Now*," he ordered, and tossed a packet of matches onto the floor beside her.

She chose instantly to strike a match and put it to the photograph. The way her hands shook would have roared the balls of any man. The photograph flamed, her face hardening in the flare. And then her hands became as firm as her face. She struck several matches and dropped them on the hat. Amazing how quickly it became a fire. And *always* there would be that charred spot on the polished floor to remind her of her spitefully ecstatic

humbling. She watched him proceed toward me. Tarrington spoke, that was all, and other people's bodies acted. It was lovely to see.

He said, as if he'd given me more than enough time to make an honorably unobtrusive exit,

"You still here?"

Could I leave at the behest of mere words? I thrust my face forward. I make it a point to stare down any man that so much as glances at me. Very nearly with equal intensity, his gray eyes darkened as the deepest ice.

"*Well*," he said.

Now wouldn't you think that was a compliment from a man who anticipated meeting his match? I was certain he only stepped closer to intensify the staring contest. But there he was beside me, and I discovered that sometimes he did do things with his own hands too. He wrapped one arm around my bare thighs and the other round my chest and back. I am a very tall man. But that man Tarrington hefted me bodily and hurled me headfirst through the door. I skidded on my back in the debris of the alley. A shock all right, but I wasted no time being shook up. I sat up.

Dark, it was dark out there.

A carbonated giggle raced in my blood at the sight of the completely black silhouette in the door, Mrs. Shipley-Spectator, recently converted to Tarringtonism. I crossed my ankles under me. I placed my hands on my knees like fat gods I've seen.

"SUCK MY EGGY ASS, YOU BITCH!"

"Now you be quiet, now that's enough, quite enough," she said. "We were kind to you, a stranger, inviting you in from the streets, and just look how you repaid us."

She meant her little speech mainly for Tarrington.

"I could tell your husband sto-o-o-ries."

"He's not interested."

"Lady, you're talking to the man that diddle you for half an hour."

"He's not interested."

“No?”

“Definitely not.”

Out of her black-silhouetted head protruded her husband’s head in full human profile and human coloring using the phone on the kitchen wall.

“Mrs. Prissy-assed bitch, I could tell him why you turned the water on. I could tell him all the things you said about him.”

“He’s not interested.”

His profile didn’t turn once toward me. But I suspected my words weren’t getting past her to him, that she caught my words and hid them somewhere. Only the back of his head on top her silhouette faced me, nodding, emphasizing on the phone, and now I was the one that couldn’t get his words past her. Never trust a good-looking bitch with a lot of good-looking kids in a good-looking home, you never know how they got it.

I braced myself on straddled legs and steadied prick’s aim. He cut loose a sparkling arch at her. That’s his equivalent of a banshee wail.

Now *here’s* the thing that made me *really* distrust her. She didn’t do anything that human women do. She didn’t shriek. She didn’t slam the door. She stayed hidden in the silhouette. Such bitches are always afraid to come out in the open and show what they feel.

I lifted my shorts lazily and adjusted them. I lifted my pants, zipped them, buttoned the button and then, taking my time, buckled my belt. Mrs. Spectator stayed so silent, so watching, that when I finished I didn’t know what to do with my hanging arms. I had the strangest feeling of standing at attention ready for her inspection. There was only one thing to do. I cocked my butt toward her, revved up pawing the ground, and fired a fine fart. Not a misfire in a gut-load.

She said,

“I can assure you that we will never meet again.”

Tarrington’s human head bobbed yes and he hung up the

phone. He walked away behind her into the house without *once* looking past her at me.

"There," she said. She slammed the door.

In the kitchen window the light went out. Lord God, I couldn't even see my hands.

But I didn't move an inch until I'd checked my pockets to make sure I still had my money and my personal papers and things. You can never be too sure about these seemingly well-off sophisticated people. Maybe the whole watery business was only a cleverly rigged way of pickpocketing my every last penny. But the only worthwhile possessions of mine left in the house were Betty, maybe a few bits of pride and my sweat and tears gone down the drain in the living room. Just because they weren't able to filch a single thing, was I supposed to be satisfied? If I traveled among thieves, and only my wits brought me out with my shirt on my back, weren't they still thieves?

Well, I wasn't going to just stand there thinking bitterly.

Idling people just barely keep warm.

I fished out my comb.

And even when working by touch in the dark, it was a good first-aid feeling combing my hair, adjusting my clothes, putting myself into the shape that was me. I did wish for a mirror, and soap and hot water and clean clothes too. Those would heal me completely.

Then I strode down the alley whistling a march that summoned my strongest happiest feelings, my heels crushing the remaining bad feelings.

I was following Betty's directions letter-perfect.

Then a horrible unaccountable thing happened.

My foot stumbled on something yielding. My body jerked with fear of hurting it. That terrible internal jerk almost flung me sprawling.

Two yellow eyes danced before me. An agonized soprano growling and shrieking paralyzed me.

"Shut up," I said.

It didn't know any better than to stay out from under my feet and I knew very well it could see in the dark. Apparently it didn't know enough to shut up when I told it to shut up either.

I kicked it.

"Now you'll shut up."

If you've heard live steam blasting through a rusty organ pipe, you may've heard the noise that came out when I kicked it. My stomach cringed more than my ears, and my ears crawled inside my head, while those two bodiless yellow eyes streamed comet-like ahead of me and went suddenly straight up. About ten feet above the ground the eyes stopped. They hovered without moving. That doesn't mean the noise stopped. The damn dumb thing was denouncing me and every salesman in the world, and the sorrier my feeling the angrier I sounded.

"Shut up, shut up, you sonofabitch, shut up."

What a night, no stars, no moon, only a darkness so thick you could cut it into chunks and serve it on a plate, and two yellow eyes that did not shut up.

I knew a man should face a raging animal, stare it down, make it peacefully place its tail between its legs and creep away. How could I stare it down? My only human eyes had no power in that darkness. But *it* could see me. I was naked and unnerved. The shrieking jittered me uncontrollably. It was run or shake to pieces.

Yes, it followed me along roof tops, fence tops, or whatever. Always above me and always directly behind me. You have no idea what it's like to have nothing but two yellow eyes following you.

Something drastic had to be done.

I sank onto my knees. I extended and lost my arms in the darkness. But those eyes could see my supplication.

I pleaded with the profound sincerity that even dumb beasts can feel and forgive.

"Please, I'm sorry, shut up, kitty cat. Please be quiet, I'm

sorry, shut up, nice kitty cat, please shut up, you sonofabitching kitty cat.”

It didn't shut up. It couldn't have hurt me more. And its eyes were getting bigger. No, not bigger, and it wasn't me seeing double, it was the screaming that doubled. Now there were two pairs of eyes.

No sense and no use, I knew, but I ran.

And then more and more pairs of eyes came trooping after me on both sides of the alley, only you couldn't see the sides of the alley, you could only see two columns of yellow eyes moving across the night toward me. Surely Tarrington had exercised his famous influence to improve cat breeding until they saw things with light manufactured in their own bodies.

My breathing came and went in frenetic marching rhythms that generated more and more morale.

Get me they might, but they'd get only my sweated-out skin and bones, with no strength or will power left for their teeth to chew, no sustenance for their stomachs to grind, no energy for their blood to absorb. Only then could they carry away my remains, because by then I would have lived my life, as much in that long desperate run as in a long three score and ten.

I couldn't see the turns in the alley. I crashed body-long against a wall.

I am not made out of rubber. I am not fitted for running at top speed into walls. I do not bounce and dissipate the shock soaring through the air.

I don't know how I got up running on my feet. My body jangled uncoordinated.

I went sprawling one two three four five six times. My frantic breathing counted each time with the certainty I must *never* fall nine times. Next time, what would have been the *seventh* time, my right hand struck down to prevent a real fall, and smacked a melon rind. *Germ*s in billions swarmed up my hand from the clinging mush. It takes billions, but billions of germs

you can *feel*. I kept the hand away from me. I didn't slacken. If it wasn't the cats, it'd be the germs. If not the germs, it'd be falling nine times, or running crash into a wall. All that remained intact in me was the urgent sense that I must not yet give up, only when the spiritual dynamo went *fttttt*, spitting sparks and then the dead dark short-circuited stink.

At last, ahead, an opening, daylight coming out of a cave. I revved harder. I lunged through the alley-intersection and collapsed directly under the blessed street light.

I just lay there discarded and sobbing. I knew the cats were afraid of honest light.

My lungs thrashed in my chest. An aching bitter dryness throbbed in my throat and eyes, as if I'd grieved and cried for days.

From the length of time it took me to recover a certain pace in breathing, a good twenty years of my precious life energy steamed toward heaven in that long and terrible alley.

On my right the street zoomed out of the darkness in a downhill curve, slowed on the grade turning past me, and then swooped away to my left. Buildings seemed made from slabs of the moon, stark doorways and curbs. There wasn't a single human being up and down that street. My stomach practiced tying knots.

I called myself to attention. I stood up.

I had not forgotten my right hand dangling slimy with melon mush. I noted the itching progress reaching now to the middle of my forearm. I became the strategist. I kept the arm away from my body so the germs must go the long way, but also rigidly straight down so they must ascend almost vertically too. I figured it gained me a half-hour. And then I'd be fighting them to the death inside myself.

I scavenged past dark store fronts for soap and water. I found only water, a bucket deserted by some sloppy wage-working window-cleaner. A dirty sponge floated half-sunk, reminding

me of those maniacal children sinking my defenseless merchantman.

I rolled my right sleeve up to the middle of my bicep, carefully using only the fingertips of my left hand. Now *you* have to listen carefully or you're going to miss something, and who knows, it might help you someday too. Yes, my left hand became slightly contaminated when it touched the right cuff, but only slightly, a manageable amount. I seized the sponge in the bucket with my left hand, making certain my contaminated fingertips stayed on top the sponge, while only the underside touched my skin, washing from my bicep to my fingertips. I laid the contaminated sponge on the sidewalk. I was using my left hand all the while. I took out my trusty handkerchief. Some men feel naked without a pistol. Myself, it's a handkerchief. I started to dry my arm but jerked the handkerchief away before it touched—*because* I remembered the contaminated rolled-up sleeve. I permitted myself no panic. I laid the handkerchief clean-side up on the sidewalk. I took out my pocketknife, always honed to an edge that would shave hair. On its handle in silver were the words CENTURY'S FIRST SALESMAN. Century was the name of the company, but I siphoned much mileage out of people who thought it was an award to the hottest salesman in a hundred years. With the pocketknife, left-handed, I nipped the stitches on the seam of my right sleeve where it joined the shoulder. Getting to the back of the sleeve I had to work by feel with an unbelievably detailed attentiveness, about as soothing as hopping on one foot along the edge of a cliff. You can imagine my relief when the sleeve just quietly slid down my arm and onto the sidewalk. But now I saw the water in the bucket contaminated by the first washing. It swam with trillions of germs becoming visible as they multiplied. If I'd sat down ten feet away, and stayed put, they would have multiplied out of that bucket and swamped me by sheer numbers, so bent were they on my destruction, But I wasn't licked yet. I threw the con-

taminated pocketknife away. A gift for a job well done, it had served me well in making another job well done. I said it then, and I say it again,

“Farewell, faithful pocketknife.”

I reasoned that most of the contamination in the bucket was near the surface. Again with my left hand I picked up the sponge from the sidewalk and squeezed it into a tight ball in my fist. I plunged it, arm and all, to the very bottom of the bucket. I let the sponge fill out under my hand. I snatched it out. I reasoned that I passed both times with such bewildering rapidity through the upper contaminated area that the germs couldn't take advantage of this chance to get a free ride. *If you have followed very closely*, however, you've noticed that I did *something very wrong*. But again I scrubbed my arm inch by inch. I dried with the clean side of the handkerchief inch by inch. The closer I came to pushing the germs off my fingertips into empty space, the more I suppressed my rising glee, since the germs might have rallied to a disastrous effort if they'd sensed my coming triumph. I mopped them off each finger in quick succession. My victory cries rioted echoing in the street. And then, yes, *then* I remembered my left arm, plunged into the bucket, the wrong thing you should have noticed too. Remember?—while the sponge filled out under my hand, my left forearm was ringed by the upper contaminated water, with plenty of time for the germs to sneak into a new position of attack. Right there blubbering, sitting down, I gave up. But giving myself up to a good cry released my most basic common sense. In the bucket I saw the light of my salvation, the reflection of the street light itself, bobbling by the dark reflection of my own head.

I dashed across the street and shinnied up the pole. Don't assume my haste meant sloppiness. I did not use my left hand and thus did not contaminate the pole, and myself in less washable places. I hitched up with my heels and right hand. I have learned to be polite. I can, if necessary, learn from cats too. At

the top I crouched on the overhanging steel bar, balanced most delicately.

I gripped the bar with my right hand. That steadied me. I wrapped my left hand around the naked bulb. Now I wasn't just washing the germs away. Now I was killing them! Searing pain grew out of my arm and blossomed with thunderous proof in me. It concentrated my attention, rousing my voice into single-minded bloodthirsty battle hymns. They didn't stand a chance.

I sterilized all contaminated skin on my left hand and the outside of my sleeve. Burnt-out dots appeared on my sleeve.

I teetered on my knees on the bar unbuttoning the cuff. Every inch a true man's job. One mistake and good-by me.

I sterilized my left forearm and the inside of the sleeve past the point where the surface of the bucket's water ringed my arm and the sneaky germs climbed right into my trap.

For my right hand the first washing may have been good enough. But good enough isn't good enough for me. It was my right hand's turn. An easy job with no sleeve to complicate it. A craftsman's final flourish. Grasping the bulb, I howled hymns.

It was certainly a good thing I'm not afraid of heights. An ugly orange-striped cat stalked under the street light, its eyes flashing up, giving me a deep sense of height. I feared the flash was recognition. But the cat continued ambling down the street alone, its head turning to keep its eyes on me. Inconsiderate beast.

Blisters swelled up on my hands and arms. It was an incendiary attack beyond the germs' ability to cope! No further proof needed, I chaffed my hands climbing down the pole, receiving an intense sense that I was safely alive.

My legs tottered.

It's best not to sit down at such times since the soul knots up the way muscles do. I managed to loose a soppy little fart. Nothing to be proud of, but it got me going.

Yes, like most men achieving a narrow escape by sheer hectic wit and energy, I suppose I was a silly sight, marching lustily down the street, singing, swinging my burned clean arms, my right arm sleeveless, my left sleeve iron-crisped by heat and dotted with burnt spots. Night air flowed over my hot arms. Not much worse than sunburned. A new feeling. A wholesome spicy feeling! My searching gaze whistled into doorways. All empty. But I don't give up so easily. I was heading back to the alley where Betty said the blue-fronted whorehouse was. Never say never to me. It would be on the right, and it would be about ten blocks from the bucket and street light.

Two alleys, after ten blocks, sported blue-fronted houses on the right. I had a fifty-fifty chance the first time, hundred percent the second.

I knocked on the fifty-fifty chance. No windows in the walls, just a big wooden door studded with iron plates, a lock and a knocker. It wasn't easy knocking with my burned hands. I started kicking. At last a scuffling stirred up inside and then a noisy playing with the lock. A cautious woman's voice said,

"Who is it?"

I kicked the door hard. "A customer. Come on, open up, it's urgent."

"Can't it wait till morning?"

"I'm a busy man. Open up."

"Who are you, busy man?"

"It's me that's got money and you that's got work."

"But I can't work now. There's bad light."

"Sure you can. I'll show you how."

Just a crack the door opened, and I jammed my foot in it. The first time I ever used the fabled professional trick! It was wise. Only a section of her face, as wide as my wedged foot, peeped through the crack, a big nose, one eye, stringy black hair, ugly ragged grayish nightgown, with lamplight glowing deep in back of her head. "Oh, it's *you*!" she said.

And I recognized the pots and pans girl, one of the two who gave me impossible directions to the whorehouse. "It's mostly me," I said.

"Surely you don't want any pots and pans fixed at this hour?"

I thought of a clever remark, but didn't say it.

"You didn't find the whorehouse, did you?"

"I've found it," I said.

"You should have followed *my* directions. It's only because she talks louder and faster that people think she knows more than me. You'll know better next time."

Placidly, from full height, I appraised her stringiness, her fat pimply nose. I concluded the best of her wasn't immediately visible. I stated in a plain business like manner,

"I have thirty dollars. I'll show it to you."

"From all I hear you better use it to buy a ticket out of town *fast*."

"Such strange things you hear."

"Hardly strange as the things I hear about *you*. Now you get out of town, and I'll get back to bed."

"Thirty dollars," I said.

She shoved the door. It only wedged my foot more comfortably.

"So you *are* the kind they say you are?" she said.

"You're even getting friendly, personal," I said.

"You should be glad that's all I'm not friendly!" she screeched, spitting with stupendous accuracy into my face.

Contemptuously I licked her sprinkle of spit from the corners of my mouth. "If I understood you I'm sure I wouldn't understand."

"Did you hear those phones ringing all over town, up and down every street? *Did* you?"

"A phone's always long-distance, baby. I don't like talking long-distance."

I laid both hands and all my weight against the door and

readied myself to shove and break into her house and into her. My grin was deadly.

"If *that's* the way you *are*!" She jabbed her heel hard on the toes of my jammed foot, *hard*, again and again. "There, there, *there*, if that's the way you are!"

And I groaned, "Oh, oh, *oh*," somehow keeping time with her.

My foot slipped out, and I thought with terror it slipped out because it had become a bag of mashed flesh and bones. She slammed the door and worked the lock.

I leaned my shoulder against the door, holding my screaming foot in both hands, and cried,

"Your directions are the worst in town!"

I meant to taunt her into telling me the way to the whorehouse. She laughed uproariously on the other side. It was a forced laugh. I yelled,

"You couldn't tell a man which hole's your cunt!"

She sang,

"I'd tell a man it's in the looking place!"

I roared,

"*Where's the whorehouse?*"

She twittered,

"In the looking place!"

She stamped in echoes away inside the house. I screamed inspired,

"Go on to bed and be cold and lonely, you bitch! With your stringy hair, your pimply nose, your knothole cunt!"

She sang again,

"It's easier to get through a knothole than to get where you want to go!" Another door slammed deeper inside. I shouted in a way that could be heard through walls twelve-foot thick.

"*Baby, I'll get where I want to go without any fucking body's help!*"

Electric twinges leaped up my leg from my foot. But they hadn't tested the limits of my first-aid know-how yet. I forced my weight onto the bad foot. I exercised it walking down one block to the other blue-fronted house, *the one-hundred-percent chance*.

A plain lit bulb swarmed with bugs above the door. The light was a good sign. They wanted to be seen.

I braced one hand on the door and lifted my throbbing left foot. A fucking stork would have mistook me for its nearest kin. I knocked twice, then three times more rapidly. The coded sequence pleased me. *Musical instruments*, something I hadn't noticed in this town, something to SELL. Now I *knew* my faculties were intact! Best to start out selling drums and cymbals, though, since these people obviously weren't elevated enough to tell a wind instrument from a skinflute.

Exhilarated I reached up and swatted around the bulb, crushing a handful of moths and knocking others sailing cuckoo into the darkness.

Ecstatically swinging my arms I beat the door. Making a symphony! And the more climactic my symphony the more certain I was the hundred-percent door would stay one-hundred-percent dumb. But if not me, my symphony would enter! My symphony would rape their sleep, if not their bodies!

Noises roused up on the other side. Maybe I'd hit on their code! I stopped knocking. I pressed my hands and one ear against the door. A lot of women were arguing intensely. They agreed again and again not to open the door, no matter what, it might be *him*! I was famous! I picked up a stone in each hand. How that big solid door resounded! I listened flat against it again. One of their number, so-and-so, they said, was still out in the streets and that terrible urgent pounding might be *her* trying to escape *him*!

I attempted a feminine whine. "Yes, it's me. Oh, please let me in."

"Yes?"

I battered the door.

My symphony grew in its variations, invading every cranny of their rooms and beds and bodies. It woke my prick. Naturally he tried to get out into the thick of it.

I unzipped. I couldn't let prick think I hadn't done my

damnedest. I laid to against the door with the stones in both hands. And he was standing up, my cheering section!

Thunderously tumultous, all my feelings, yet the clearest sensation reaching me became a slight, mystifying, heated pressure on the small of my back. It had to be *eyes*. Pained flesh, such as mine, is sensitive even to the minute temperature changes caused by burning hating eyes. If I turned around, I would see, I was certain, a spectacle bent on my ultimate persecution, rank upon rank of pairs of yellow eyes across roof tops and fences and on the street. It was my back against their eyes, but as everyone knows the human back has only limited staring power. I stared at the grain of the wood in the door with my nose against it, developing intensity. Now I was ready. Prick and me spun, thrusting forward to meet them eye to eye.

I was wrong about the ranks of yellow eyes. I wasn't wrong about the eyes.

Across the street a hippy, tall, busty woman leaned against the lamppost, with her arms folded in a black shawl that wrapped her head and shoulders. Her eyes glowed as diamonds melting.

A mistrustful familiarity made me hop and limp toward her. She slanted her shawl covering her cheek and mouth.

It was *Betty*! I whooped, threw out my arms, staggered on my bad foot.

For one moment I admitted enthusiastically that I was mistaken and it was only the street light, reflected in her eyes, that caused the pressure focused on my back, the way a magnifying glass concentrates the sun.

Shy and jittery, just like when selling my caskets, I said, hobbling up to her,

"Thank God, it's a small world!"

"Small enough, she said."

For one bitter second I wanted to fold up and cry.

"So you're against me too, Betty."

"Listen, Mister, you'd save everyone a lot of trouble, including yourself especially, if you just packed up and left town."

"You know, Betty, it took two to bake those cookies."

And then I noticed her cheek lumpy with a dark bruise split in the middle by an oozing cut. Bruised too was the spirited sexy look in her eyes. I'd like to have seen that sonofabitch try that shit when I was around. I reached to touch her cheek.

Shuddering, she turned her face away from my hand. "How awful you look!"

"Yes," I said, "my capacity for survival amazes even me." I took her by both shoulders, shaking her just a little to make her know how serious I was. "Betty, dearest, you must *believe* me when I tell you I think you and me are the *only* human people from here to the mountains and all the way back to the sea! Betty, you must *listen* when I tell you I have thirty dollars! *Listen* and suggest a nice little café, with nice food, nice music, nice people, nice drinks, nice soft light and dancing!"

"Mister, button up your pants, you're on a public street, and button up your mouth!"

"Only thing public in this town is everybody's privacy. Betty, let's go where we can be very, very private."

"Go where?"

"Go *away*! I know a town *faraway* on the sea, the real living killing sunny sea, where even the sharks are nicer than the kids in that living room. Betty, if you're the only one that's managed to stay human here you'll be past all believing in towns away from here."

Raving with surprise at myself, so help me I don't know why I started sneezing. Everywhere I turned I sneezed, and no choice but to cry out, "Betty, let's get *married*!"

"You're *hideous*!"

I lowered my crippled left foot onto the ground.

"So it's hideous to take you away from Tarrington? Hideous to take you to another town where you'd live as people here only dream of living?"

She hissed, "This is my home. I love my home."

"You real whore!"

She sobbed with a hard body-jerk. Cheeks working she spat a big gob right into the fur showing through my shirt-neck. Germs, for sure.

"You're not going inside that whorehouse without me following you. You know that, Betty."

She spat again. "I've slept on sidewalks before."

"I've got thirty dollars, Betty."

"Anything I would do with you, mister, is just as awful as your thirty filthy dollars!"

"Now, baby, I'd heard dollars were democrats."

"Your money won't pass around here and you neither. Button up your *pants*, mister, button up your *lip*, and get out of my way!"

Snootily she headed past me toward the whorehouse. I grappled her ass-backwards against me. There was no sweet nostalgia in my grip.

"Let me go! If you'll just please let me go!"

"I'll let you go when I've let you have it. And if you don't shut up and stop kicking, I'll shout, and we'll see what the town and the Tarringtons think seeing you and me together again." And it gagged her all right.

I bore my weight down on her back. She doubled onto her knees. I jerked her dress up over her back. And there was her ass, with no panties whatsoever, a cold exciting surprise! Maybe those special panties were part of her uniform at the Tarringtons! Maybe at the end of the day they blindfolded her and used their secret method to take them off!

I discovered prick hardly knew what was going on! An absurd situation, holding the cramped violence of the woman around the waist with one arm, coaxing prick awake with the other hand, and then reaching into my rear pocket for the rubbers. Her struggling chafed my burning hands and arms. She would soon learn that I was past pain. I rolled on one rubber. Prick swelled against it unreasonably. I rolled on the second rubber. I have

heard of one breaking and there is a certain probability of two breaking. And some say that using a rubber dulls the sensation, lessens satisfaction, drastically, they say. I say using two prolongs it, double your money and safety too.

She tried to keep prick out by keeping her thighs together. I pushed on the back of her head, grinding her face on the pavement. Prick went butting under her ass. He entered suddenly. And don't tell me she wasn't ready to enjoy it, that cunt was primed as juicy as a hubful of grease, holding onto prick for dear life.

"Don't lie, you bitch, you feel it, I know you feel it!"

So dog-fashion under the street light we did it, just what this town deserved. And no matter how hard she tried to hold it in, her excitement escaped between her teeth. And then prick probed the limit of the heavenly pipe and started shooting her up inside, *so he thought*, but he forgets the rubbers.

A dangerous moment! I had to keep my wits about me while he was coming! I shouted,

"Spit on me, will you?" I jumped back. I raised my arm. "You're not going to get the chance to fuck with me, poor Miss Betty!"

Like an ax I swung the side of my hand against her neck. She rolled. She huddled with jerking curled-up knees against another windowless wall, whimpering, whimpering, whimpering. At least now she had reason to whimper.

WELL!!! A good calisthenic, that's just about what it amounted to. Never say never to me.

How wonderful to stretch and feel as tall as I was! And how easy to breathe, and no pain could come from my arms and foot into the great clean gladdening!

I hobbled away. I felt so good I was singing hymns.

But you can't forget some things, and I couldn't forget how sweetly passionate Betty was in the kitchen.

I went back to her. I stuffed a ten-dollar bill into a pocket of

her skirt. Ten was enough. After all, I'd done most of the work. And she'd be glad of the money in the morning. Maybe she'd think it was only a bad dream and she'd really been working because there was the money to prove it! She must need the money too, working two jobs. Besides it was only because I'd hit her that she was feeling bad. Too bad I couldn't have trusted the excitement she was feeling and then it would have been really fine and all thirty dollars to go with it. A warm tenderness swelled my belly. My eyes got sweetly wet. I couldn't love her whimpering against the wall, but I could love the Betty I remembered in the kitchen. I pulled her skirt down over her legs. I kissed her cheek. "Sweet dreams, Betty, maybe you'll learn someday."

It was all better than great stretching in the morning after a good night's sleep. Yes, a little tenderness is almost as bracing as a good fuck, now and then.

Hiking away down the street, my whistling rode the roof tops, her whimpering its undertone.

And then the whimpering stopped behind me.

It stopped so quickly. I took a few steps, slowed, listened. I saw her getting onto her feet. She screamed. Light creviced the whorehouse front. A head poked out.

Blubbering Betty staggered, holding her head, to the door. She accused me of *attempted* rape! So she proved herself a liar in more ways than one!

I bellowed down the street,

"I assure you I always finish what I start out to do!"

And Betty pointed at me and shrieked without conscience again and again that I was a *liar*!

The whorehouse doors swung wide, and whores disheveled in nightgowns stampeded into the street howling after me.

It wasn't easy to run on my bad foot. Only when the whores came too damn close did I start running adequately. Twice they hit my back with stones, and once with a rotten vegetable that

sopped my shirt against my skin. YES, but I had good reason to believe the germs in this town were less virulent than the people. The blows on my back merely loosened my muscles. I kept on running.

Then I realized something strange.

Their shouting and cursing sounded mechanical, and they didn't chase me with their hearts in it either, only making a good show of a try at getting me. I didn't have much energy to apply to this puzzle, but I wasn't about to give them a chance to make a good show of trying to kill me.

Onto the town square I came running under a long arcade. Echoes cheered my slapping feet. A block away, light projected onto the sidewalk below the hotel's sign.

Jammed up behind me, where the street opened onto the square, the whores taunted me, going no further. Like the cats, they were afraid of honest, civilized light.

No need to go on running, but by now I believed my body was made for no other purpose. I was pleased with it, and pleased with the precision of my breathing too.

I loped easily under the hotel's marquee.

Up at the head of the steps a man leaned against the side of the entrance, his hand in his pocket hitching up his suit coat. Light poured over his shoulders from inside the hotel. I raised my hand against it. But only one man in this town possessed the total wherewithal to express himself always with sureness and ease.

Beside Tarrington my bags and sample cases were ranked in a neat stair-step row, children rigid for a family portrait. I recognized them instantly by number, size, and shape.

He must have started talking as soon as I ran up. But I needed rest and the light hurt my eyes. I stayed on the lower step, entrenching my head snugly in my arm against the wall. And it was easy to breathe, hearing my heartbeat, alone and man to man, his voice without body filling the darkness.

"Yes, I managed to come here before the clerk tore your bags to pieces. Do you know that when I took the knife away from him he fell on your things raging to tear them apart with just his bare hands and teeth? That's amazing, you think?"

A big wobbly roach crept from under the wall and scuttled toward my foot. If I couldn't trust the cats, much less the whores in this town, I'd every reason to suspect the roaches were organized on Tarrington's side too. And he might just be distracting me with talk to facilitate the roach's sneak attack. It scuttled under the warp of my sole. I rocked the shoe down firmly.

I chuckled hearing Tarrington,

"You do find it strange, don't you? Oh, you mustn't think his rage was honest, spontaneous, true, whatever those words mean. It was mainly his simple desire to please me. And how you distinguish between his own desires and his desires to please me becomes almost impossible. If he appeared beyond restraint, it was only to show how beautifully helpless he was before the strength of his own passionate fidelity to me. And I'm afraid the whole town has treated you with the same honest sort of dishonesty. And I think you know why I tell you these things."

An asylum, this town, and I didn't have the qualifications for admittance, that's what he meant. But maybe he was jealous of the spiritual time I made with his wife too. And maybe Betty was his whore.

Now he got folksy, confiding.

"Remember old Shipley? You couldn't have stayed thirty minutes in that house without me there and not heard of old Shipley. When I came to this town, Shipley was just gone. And these people had never seen my kind before. Just as they've never seen your kind. But soon you'll be gone too." His laugh was cool and easy. "I think you really don't understand me."

He *was* damned hard to understand. I dropped my arm. I faced him. I shriveled with the awfulness of my appearance. You only see yourself when others look at you. He didn't change his leaning position.

I started up the steps. I couldn't trust that my words, going through the air of this town, would arrive in his ears still believing and saying what they'd believed and said when formed on my tongue. You have to watch a tongue closer than a woman anyway, treacherous the way it changes its mind.

I stopped a couple steps below Tarrington. Past him I gazed into the vaulted hotel lobby, at the cream-painted walls with walnut trim and the mint-green deeply-cushioned furniture. Doggily the bastard clerk bent writing over his desk. Behind him the pigeonholes stacked up honeycombed. His glasses flashed at me.

While I talked to Tarrington I stared ferociously at the clerk, daring the clerk to meet me *any* night *anywhere* alone.

"I could use a night's sleep," I said.

"I would have to stay up all night guarding your life and limb."

"Well," I said, "I don't suppose you can be blamed for the customs in your own town."

"Not mine," he said. His smile aggravated me with the sense that he thought it was amusing that I couldn't perceive some simple mystery.

"Yes, I forgot everyone was only trying to please you."

I moved up another step. I looked level into his eyes so porcelain cold and gray coming to meet mine. So I was really taller than him. I stooped to pick up my bags. True, in one there were long-edged knife cuts and three sets of teeth marks so deep you could have taken a plaster cast and made that fucking clerk a set of dentures, though it was obvious he didn't need them.

"You should never have said never to me, Tarrington. And never fear. I didn't get any of your doors open, but I got into one of your holes. Besides your town, I mean."

"Have you seen Betty?"

"*Who's* Betty?"

For once Tarrington's eyes changed about uneasily and he shifted the position of his feet. "She's an impetuous girl," he said. "I'm just afraid I treated her a little roughly."

I clapped his shoulder. "You know, Tarrington, it makes me glad to think you and me might just be guilty of the same thing."

He yawned. He said,

"An hour should be time enough for you to get out of town."

A nerve, that bastard, telling me to get out of town. And he stayed in that sassily comfortable leaning position too. I don't know why I didn't give him a shove and beat the shit out of him right there.

But I was already going down the steps with my bags under my arms toward the big park in the middle of the town square.

Horse turds were strewn over the street. I set my bags down. I pretended brushing my pants. I sneaked one moist, firm turd into my hand. I turned suddenly, hurled it.

Tarrington sprang from his leaning position, into the middle of the hotel's entrance, legs apart. And then I must have hit him. He jumped, dashed into the lobby. My war cry glee rode out of my mouth. I fired the turds until the clerk ducked below his desk too. I shouted between my hands,

"Now you know not every man-jack will lick your ass!"

I picked up my bags, and went into the park, at a jittery but honorable pace.

All the park's cobbled paths led in darkness from the street. Through the branches and leaves I could see the center well lighted. But I just couldn't shake the tension out of the muscles in my back.

Again there were beds and beds of flowers along the walk. Lilies, the only distinguishable variety, stood together in groups, sticking out their big golden tongues, *goddamn them*. Swinging a suitcase, I knocked those lilies silly. Flowering branches, acacia and jacaranda and bougainvillea, hung over the walk, drooped in my face. Putting my bags under one arm, I gave them the back of my hand.

Many benches were set in alcoves. They resembled lovers' benches, but it didn't surprise me that they were empty, a custom that hadn't yet reached this town.

A statue poked up into the trees in one alcove. Weeds reared

up from between the stones in the walk leading to it. Obviously this statue wasn't visited except by a few oddballs who maybe wanted to fuck in private. I paid a visit. I crowded with weeds and branches around it standing on a pedestal. That's about all I could tell about it. I struck a match, and there was the name on the base. SHIPLEY. Yes, that was the remarkable man, strong and brave and sure on his feet and froze solid in two minutes. Or maybe it was his grandfather. Anyway, if the weeds were as viciously determined as everything else in this town, the name wasn't due to be remembered.

I hurried away, not liking it that my body thought it was necessary to crouch.

In the park center, in the middle of a concrete circle, was a roofed pavilion, illuminated by lights hanging in the trees. Great brass frogs, rearing goats and monkeys faced inward, water spewing from their mouths into the moat that surrounded the circle. *Yes*, the damned pavilion was named TARRINGTON, in mosaic for the dancing men and women of centuries to see. A real coup, treble for his sonofabitching money, a zoo, a fountain, and a dance floor all together in his name. Wouldn't have been any sense anyway in my pursuing a livelihood in a town that couldn't afford them separately. I crossed the bridge and deposited my bags under the roof. How still, with the water spattering ceaselessly, and the good water smell easing down into me.

I went out to the moat again. I opened my pants. Hanging there in a goopy mess were the two rubbers, and poor prick almost smothered. I dropped the rubbers into the moat.

My gut quaked polluting the water that smelled so good.

So I pissed in the water.

Beside me a huge brass frog raised his mouth agape as high as my chest. I patted his head.

"Tarrington sort of put you in place too," I said.

I moved along the edge of the moat away from where I pissed and washed my hands.

A branch, bejeweled with thumb-sized red fruit, extended

over the water. That the tree stood untouched in the middle of the town square meant that Tarrington didn't want them picked. I ate everything on that tree. I mean I stripped it *ragged*. Sweet, very sweet, the lean yellow flesh loosening and soothing my throat.

My back hardened, facing what it could never see.

Under the pavilion roof, I arranged my bags as pillows and rests for my head and my aching foot, my blistered hands and arms.

Settling down for a night on the road, I get philosophical. I see that things come and go and nothing makes much difference. I feel small, cuddly small, under the far, faraway stars. A good night's rest cures all, and I can't remember a morning when I didn't wake hungry and ready for all comers. Tomorrow I would head south into the world beyond these pint-sized city limits, into other towns, other territories, other women. No doors would open in this town. I'd plugged the last hole. I jostled about among my bags. I slapped a few mosquitoes and cleaned my fingers scraping them on the concrete. I listened to the brass zoo steadily pissing and spitting streams of water, the buzzing of insects, and the air buttery with the scent of flowers.

Then, in the dark bushes beyond the moat, a small and stupid noise announced itself. A man who hadn't slept much alone in many strange places mightn't have noticed it.

Noises flurried through the bushes.

They were almost clever enough to let me go to sleep right under the lights.

I tried to control myself. I sat up. I was trapped, shivering with sweat.

Right there I hunched my head between my knees and started crying. I would let them do what they wanted. I just didn't want to watch. I sobbed, gulping the good water smell.

But I didn't let myself go on that way for long.

I took charge of myself with a jerk.

They were in perfect darkness beyond the light. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I wasn't going to let them get me lying down. I cracked a suitcase. I pulled out my pistol, concealing it against my thigh. Who was in the darkness? The cats? The whores? The whole fucking town, roaches, rats, and all?

Let me tell you I was lonely, a perfect target in the center of those white lights.

I unzipped my pants.

Now I wasn't alone. My friend muscled out, standing up to keep the watch with me.

We knew our only chance, and not a very good one.

We must lull them. And then take them by surprise.

I bowed my head. I pretended to pray, out loud, for someone to watch over us. Not many people will shoot a man while he's praying. And most get sleepy waiting for him to stop. I became absolutely musical, lulling them. At the moment when I was rolling my head and raving LORD, WATCH OVER US, we leaped up, banshee screaming, in one terrific jump over the moat.

I cleared the way firing into the bushes. My friend, admirable foolhardiness, entered the darkness first. He is a little younger than me. Chilling gusts whoomed up and down the street, bumping us. *Empty*. Everyone was in the park. Dodging into an alley, we surprised their rear guard. A pair of eyes. I am an excellent shot. That was the only noise.

We reached the highway.

We crouched in the ditch, keeping shoulders down in the weeds. My friend was tired. A job nobly done. I complimented him and tucked him in.

A sudden wind shotgunned me with sleety rain. "Fucking shit!" I yelled, trying to dodge and slap the rain away.

I waited until, icily drenched, at last I saw headlights moving through the shattering fall of rain. Certainly wasn't the moment

to twiddle my thumb politely. Standing square in the middle of the pavement, waving both arms, I flagged down the big semi.

I put the pistol in my back pocket. I didn't want to scare the driver. A bull-chested, big-headed man, with a red beret, and his chin burrowed into the sweat shirt seamed around his neck.

I was so furious and sad we didn't talk much, just where you going, fine, how are you, could do with a little less rain, me too.

He drove with his eyes gripping the road, and very fast, careening through the endless rain.

Was I supposed to feel good? My bags and sample cases were deserted among barbarians who knew no better than to use the medicines as spices, and would decorate themselves hanging the toilet equipment around their necks.

(continued from front flap)

The urban swarm as seen through the eyes of a retired Midwestern professor of American history is the theme of Charles Jules Reiter's *This Night in Sodom*. Determinedly seeking emotional release in New York, he finds an America staggeringly different from his idyllic classroom picture: the cheap vulgarity of a clangorous Times Square, a squalid hotel room, a Negro prostitute, a Greenwich Village bar-and-party tour. The conflict between his deep sense of outrage at what has happened to his country and a feeling of obligation to his fellow creatures finds an extraordinary resolution in this striking novel.

In *Custom*, a story written with mature authority, John Schultz describes the familiar elements of American life in a startling pattern. The story of a salesman entering a strange town, it converts the traditional drummer's dream of merchandising success, quick popularity, and easy sex into a remarkable nightmare. Commercial life is satirized and, on a deeper level, dream and obsession are perceived with exact psychological insight. "My effort," the author notes, "is spent in attaining perception, in struggling to set the imagination free by achieving an objective relation to it."

Jacket design by Roy Kublman

GROVE PRESS, INC.

64 University Place

New York 3, N. Y.

THOMAS FIRTH JONES was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1934. He studied at Harvard College, Tyler School of Fine Art, and Washington College, and taught for four years at Buckingham Friends' School. He is married and has four children.



CHARLES JULES REITER was born in Binghamton, New York in 1928. He attended the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Baltimore City College, and Baltimore University. He has worked at public relations, journalism, publishing, and with little theater groups. He is married to an opera singer and has one child.

JOHN SCHULTZ was born in Columbia, Missouri in 1932. He has worked in publishing, served in Korea as a medic, and spent some time in Japan on leave from Korean duty. He has previously published work in several magazines, including *Big Table*, *Evergreen Review*, *Chicago Review*, and *Studies on the Left*.

